CutBank

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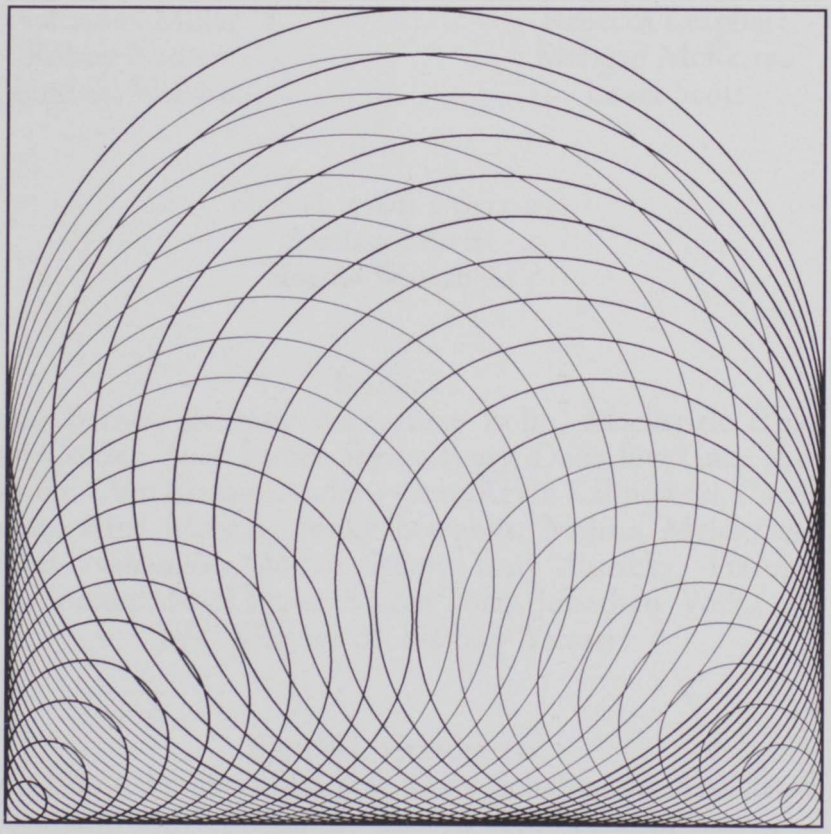
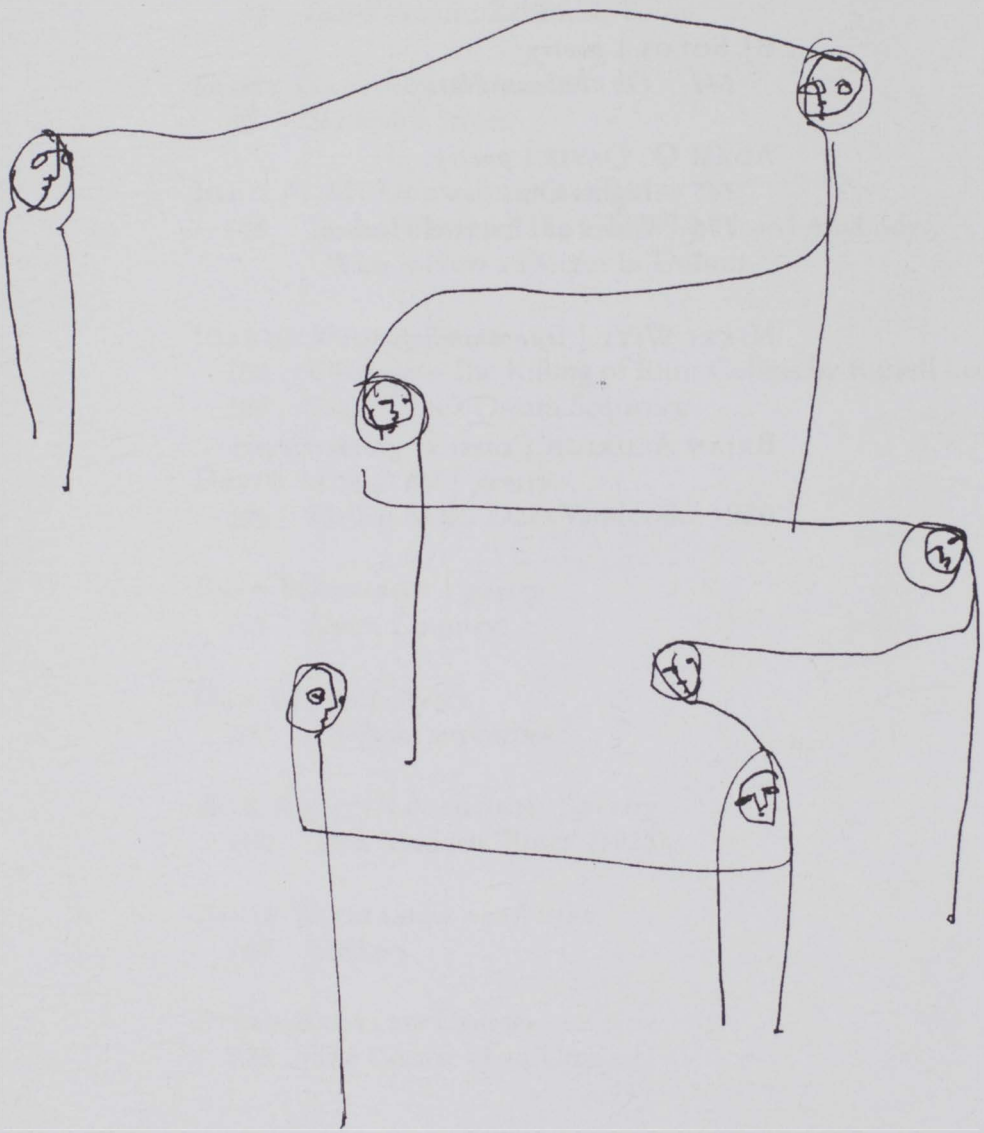


THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA 2011

SPECIAL THANKS TO
Judy Blunt, Prageeta Sharma, Karin Schalm, the Associated Students of Montana, the Second Wind Reading Series, the Top Hat, & Humanities Montana.

CONTENTS



The Name of the Game Was Monster

We played it like tag on our bunk beds.
The well water was sulfur and rotten eggs.

One girl: the monster.

Spiders congregated on webs we brushed away
with the backs of bare hands.

She picked top or bottom bunk.

Our *white trash neighbors* spit
phlegm-wads on the dock.

On the other bunk, the others huddled.

At the local party store, he bought a Milky Way.
The candy covered in a glob of maggots.

She tried to tag us with outstretched limbs.

The dock balanced on water-filled barrels.
A steel ladder, slick with neon green algae.

We screamed.

I didn't jump out far enough. My thighs
smacked against the splintered boards.

We scurried from her hands and feet.

Crumpled in a wheelbarrow, full of whiskey,
they pushed her along the edge of the road.

She yelled *switch.*

They buried a stray cat
up to its neck, used a lawnmower.

We dropped to the bottom.

Wild ash embers spit from split trees,
burnt quick holes in our blankets.

She climbed to the top.

Plastic beach chairs with shaky aluminum legs
collapsed, folded up around you.

If she tagged you, you became the monster.

Construction

There never was a moon. Nails
littered the floor. These roofless houses
and beam after beam of unfinished wood.
The stairs without a railing,
and the basement with a floor
of gravel like teeth. She thought
she was in love
but also knew she wasn't.
The trees in the yard
were the size of thumbs.
He brought her there to lick
her stomach. The sod needed
to take root. She could pull it up
with her hands. Pipes jutted
from holes cut with circular saws.
The pipes made her think
of vocal cords that forgot their voices
after someone stole their mouths.

HOMESPUN

Some people are trash and you can just tell. It doesn't matter how you dress them up or how far they've come. It's in their skin—skin raised on hot dogs, canned beans, spaghetti two nights a week and microwave dinners. I can see it right now looking in the mirror. I can see that yellowy chicken-fat color that'll never go away. Facelifts, implants, jewelry; none of it matters. Once the youthfulness fades, the trash shines through.

Byron has tanned skin. Even the palms of his hands are tan. He grew up on tenderloins and fancy cheese, probably brought his lunch to school in a zipper cooler—one of those kids who had Tupperware with real food inside: crab salad, club sandwiches. Byron is definitely not trash—so much the opposite that he can't even recognize trash when he sees it. Like he's never seen it. Byron isn't trash, but he's stupid.

I told him my parents are dead. It's not exactly the truth. My father left when I was thirteen. He could very well be dead, but last I heard he was in Pittsburgh. My mother, as far as I know, lives in a dilapidated little house in eastern Pennsylvania. The house's name is painted on a piece of two-by-four and hangs above the front door: Madeline. It's always been Madeline. This is the house I grew up in, the house my father left, the house my mother was becoming.

Every house has a story. Some stories don't stick; they dissipate and disappear along with the generations. Other times the stories fester. They get in the walls, they find their way into every little crack and crevice like smoke. Sometimes a story is so thick in a house that the eggs in the refrigerator are black with it.

Madeline, apparently, was the name of the madam. The house was one in a cluster of small time whorehouses in the 1940's. The ladies catered to the black-fingered, thick-necked factory workers from Bethlehem Steel. *Burn all day and ball all night*, that's how they tell it. And apparently that's how it went down, because the other three houses were set on fire, one at a time, over the years.

Madeline survived the fires, the religious zealots, the angry wives. They say the old madam was tall for a woman and could be seen every night standing on the porch with a shotgun full of rock salt for anybody who looked at her sideways. And that included The Law. All hours of the night. Standing, not sitting.

The house operated every day of the year including Christmas and was really quite a fixture of the community by the time Madeline died in 1968. The whole operation just blinked out after that.

By the time we moved in it was 1980 and the house had been through at least six families. There were crayons in every air duct, plastic doll parts in the flower boxes like little graveyards. Six families lived there, but I never heard a single story about any of them.

I wouldn't say that the house was haunted. Despite the stories about girls dying in the fires, I never saw ghost or even a wisp of suspicious fog. It was a house where men played and women worked. That was the spirit that haunted the place, that philosophy. It had a carpeted bathroom, a kitchen sink that faced a wall, a full-sized refrigerator and a full-sized freezer that took up most of the tiny kitchen. There was no yard, no grass. I grew up playing in the long gravel driveway, isolated by tree after tree after tree.

"Do you miss your parents?" Byron asks me out of nowhere. The dog is staring at him, he's staring at the television,

and I'm staring at myself in the mirror. All the staring makes the space between us feel vacuous. Words evaporate the minute they leave your mouth, so that we always seem to be shouting a little.

I've been thinking about my mother a lot lately, evocations that have come on completely out of the blue. It's been over ten years since I've seen or spoken with her. I tell myself if she had a telephone it would be different. I tell myself she's probably come around. I lie to myself about all this. I also lie when I tell myself I don't care and I don't wonder.

I remember how things were before I left. The day my father left, for example. I remember clear as a bell how my mother ripped the carpeting out of the bathroom with her hands and dragged his Lazyboy into the woods.

And then that was it.

As Madeline thinned and dry-rotted on the outside, as the white paint flaked off, my mother became the moist, fat, innards—pasty-pale like a grub, only the colored lights of the television flashing across her face and arms.

"Sometimes I miss them," I tell Byron. "I wish you could have met them."

Byron's parents are living in the Greek Isles. He's shown me dozens of pictures. The pictures are very glossy, taken with a good camera, and remind me of pastries to the point that I have to work to keep them out of my mouth.

His parents are dark, smiley people on the deck of a boat.

On the greens of a golf course.

On the back of a horse.

His mother enjoys hats as far as I can tell, and his father likes a good sweater vest. They have lots of sharp-looking teeth and for a year and a half I've managed to avoid them completely.

I come out of the bathroom and help Byron with his tie. "The stock market never sleeps," he says. The words disappear in the air and I'm too embarrassed that he would say such a thing to reply. He's always saying these kinds of corny things

that sound like B-movie dialog. Byron is very important. He's a busy man. I tell myself he doesn't have time to awe me with wit or even to formulate interesting sentences.

I've told him that I'm part owner of Le Caravelle, a French restaurant downtown. I'm actually the floor manager there, but Byron doesn't know the difference. He doesn't question the late hours so long as his shirts are starched and his suits are laid out for him. Byron is a creature of routine. These are the easiest kind to fool.

"My mother is going to love you," he says in the kitchen, legs crossed and between bites of buttered toast. He says it very nonchalantly and I wonder how someone like him didn't learn not to talk with his mouth full. I have a flash where I picture Byron as a boy, wearing short pants and shooting the nanny with a slingshot.

"What do you mean your mother is going to love me?"

He doesn't answer. I blink my eyes a lot and look right at him, but he's picked up the newspaper and is pretending not to notice me. I can tell by the way he's holding his head that he's pretending, and I stare, willing my eyes to burn holes through the paper, through his head, and set fire to the drapes behind him.

"I told you. They're flying in Thursday." This is typical Byron. He's manipulative in such a dumb way that I'm not even sure it can be called manipulation; it's more like bad acting. It's like we're suddenly characters on a soap opera. This is the third time in two months his parents are "flying in." I'm fast running out of excuses.

I cannot possibly meet Byron's parents. What if they're smart? That's all I need is some clever mother tracing my steps and whispering disapproval into the simple ear of her only son. I mean, Byron may be dumb, but he's a good catch. Even I recognize that.

"Thursday? As in the day after tomorrow? Jesus, Byron. I won't be here Thursday. I told you." My brain is fighting like a gladiator, spinning webs and building whole cities. Sometimes the most difficult part of all this is closing the floodgate of my mouth; people think you're lying when you say too many sentences in a row. Byron looks very serious, folds the paper and lifts his briefcase to his lap. The latches snap open and he looks at me, waiting.

"Food show in Virginia." I say. "The restaurant booked the reservations months ago. You need to get your head out of your ass, Byron."

"It has to be you? You can't send someone else?" He already sounds defeated and I don't want to give him a chance to recover.

"Byron. No. No. I can't send someone else. I don't ask you to send someone else to all of your millions of weekend conferences, do I? I hate it when you do this." It's a made-up argument and I know Byron doesn't have the time or energy for it. He never remembers specifics. He sips his coffee and stares at me. I stare right back at him. It's a battle of endurance.

"Well, I guess they'll be disappointed. Yet again." He folds the newspaper and breaks the stare.

He leaves early without saying goodbye. I spend the day making our apartment as clean, cold, and sparse as a museum. At least his mother will have the impression that I'm neat. Exhibit A: good housekeeping.

I can remember how my mother battled with the black mildew at the edges of the shower. The blackness grew from under the moist bathroom carpet, from the perpetual sogginess there. She fought with chemicals and brute force, eventually tearing the carpet out, only to expose that the slimy-rot had gotten deep into the floorboards. That was the start of it— that bathroom floor.

She decided that the bathroom should be "let go." "Forget about it," she told me. "Just don't worry about it." I was a teenager at the time and I worried about it. I worried about falling through the bathroom floor every time I had to pee. I could see the ground underneath, the plumbing, the spiders and dead leaves.

I once walked in on a squirrel in the middle of the night. He fell into the toilet bowl. I peed outside for two weeks after that episode. I stopped inviting friends over after school and started smoking. And as soon as I graduated from high school, I mean, that very day, I left for good.

At work two girls don't show up so I have to get out my apron and take a few tables. I try to imagine waiting on Byron's parents. I'd call his father sir:

"What can I get you to drink, sir?"

"A dirty martini with a twist."

"Yes, sir. Absolutely, sir! I'll be right back with it."

I'll call any schmuck sir. I don't care if you have three teeth and have forgotten to brush them, I'll call you sir. If you're old, I might call you folks, or fellas, but if you're old and drunk I'll call you gentlemen and smile a lot. Young men in casual clothes are called guys, but if they're in suits, I usually stick to sir. You can't go wrong with sir.

I'm not sure what I would call Byron's mother. Women are tricky. Middle-aged and old ones that are drinking beer or liquor get called ladies, but if they're drinking wine, then you go with yes ma'am and no ma'am.

I bet she'd examine the silverware, hold the water glasses up to the light and frown. I bet she'd look at me with some kind of suspicion—like I might drop the food, or give her cold coffee, or somehow ruin her entire meal—which is the most important thing in her whole week.

When I get home at 2 a.m., Byron is still not there. It's not uncommon, in fact it's likely, that he fell asleep on his leather sofa at the office and he'll roll in early in the morning to exchange his wrinkled clothes for fresh ones. He's such a hard worker. I'm impressed by his dumb power, his diligence. He's a bull.

I take a picture of his parents into the bathroom with me and lay it out on the cold tile floor as I sit to pee. I try to look into his mother's flat photo eyes, but they're black and dead like a shark's. I tell myself it's because it's a picture. I'm always lying to myself.

I pretend to pack for the pretend food show. I know I won't need any of the clothes, but it's good to keep up appearances. That's what it's all about. That's what I tell myself. I even kiss Byron before I go and we joke about me eating too many sample éclairs.

Usually when Byron's parents visit, I just drive. I find myself at casinos, at bars. I wake up stretched out in the back of my car in gravel parking lots or rest stops on the side of the highway. I don't usually have a set destination, but today, after three hours of driving, I become suddenly aware of where I'm going.

My mother's house is in the middle of Pennsylvania Dutch farm country. It's all single-lane roads through dense forest, no shoulder. It's like being *in* the earth—navigating the nooks and crannies, and then all of a sudden you're on top of it, spilled out onto striped fields as far as the eye can see.

I smoke about a hundred cigarettes and whisper made-up conversations, freaking myself out imagining what condition I'll find her in: A six-hundred pound, whiskey guzzling, shotgun-wielding, maniac. A skeleton.

The driveway is almost a half a mile with no good place to turn around. I notice how overgrown things have become; everything seems thicker and darker than I remember. The road has gone from uniform dusty stone, to wet, messy, dirt. It isn't

long before I recognize this as a wasted effort. It doesn't look like there's been another car down this road in a very long time.

I actually stop halfway and consider backing out. I tell myself: let sleeping dogs lie. But instead of going back, and for no real reason, I put the car in park and call Byron on the cell phone. I get his voice mail and leave a message saying that I just checked in to the hotel and I'll call again later. I seriously don't know why he has a cell phone if he doesn't carry it with him. Every time I go out of town he forgets to take his phone with him to work. I swear he's like a little kid. Getting Byron ready for work is like getting a six-year-old ready to go sledding.

I find myself inching slowly forward down the driveway, negotiating around fallen branches and potholes, telling myself it'll be easier to turn around at the house than to try to back out. Lie.

At first sight, the house makes my stomach jump. *Madeline.* There is something warm deep down in the anxiety that I'm feeling. Some kind of nostalgia, I guess. It catches me off guard and I initially mistake it for nausea, rolling down my window to let in some air. The air smells like moss and rotted acorns, like an old woodpile—which is essentially what it is. The roof over the porch has collapsed and the windows are all broken out. The forest has taken most of the foundation, including the porch steps, which seem to have completely disappeared.

Guessing that I should have a look around as long as I came all this way, I get out of the car and cautiously approach the door. I have to pull myself up into the doorway by grabbing at some pretty precarious-looking trim, but with the windows broken out, it's actually brighter inside than it used to be. The carpet in the living room is growing grass and the whole place smells like mushrooms. The furniture is gone. The bathroom floor is completely caved in. Looking down into the hole, I can see the broken shards of mossy green porcelain down below. I'm afraid to pull the tattered shower curtain open. Afraid of raccoons or what, I'm not sure, but I leave it alone.

I know I could go to town and dig up some information, ask around. But I feel like the house is a sign. What I had here is dead, long gone. I don't want to talk to my mother. What was I thinking? At least she got out, I tell myself. My mother must have pulled herself out, detached, amputated. She must have turned off the television at some point and dislodged from the house. Maybe somebody came and got her. Maybe she dried out, melted down, combusted. Who knows?

It's getting dark and I figure I'll sleep in the car for a few hours and then drive back the way I came. I'll stop and have breakfast, maybe do some yard-sale shopping in the morning. I'll invent my mother a new history. Make her a bank-teller or a dancer or something. I might just be able to believe it, if it's good enough. Some stories stick.

Getting into the car, I notice that my side mirrors are gone. Not the whole casings, just the glass. After a short deliberation, I conclude that they must have fallen out, strange as that seems, somewhere on the way here. I sleep lightly with my doors power-locked and my hand on a heavy metal mag-lite.

During that part of the morning when the sky looks electric blue and everything is steaming just a little, I step out of the car and squat near the back bumper to pee. After the trickle stops, I continue to hear something that sounds like running water. There's no stream or creek near here, or at least there didn't used to be. The sound seems to be coming from Madeline.

As I'm pulling myself into the doorway, there is some kind of noisy clamor. It spooks me (the squirrel in the toilet bowl) and I fall backwards off the porch, a piece of the door molding coming off in my hand. I'm just about to try again, when I catch a glimpse of a figure running into the woods. It's through a broken window, obscured by vegetation, and its fast; so I don't really get a good look at it. But I swear it looks like it's running on two legs.

I surprise myself by following it. I'm jumping from the porch, yelling like an idiot, probably giving it a heart attack. Then I'm just running, whatever I thought I was chasing is gone, and branches are flashing by me, twigs ripping through my pantyhose. I curse the cigarettes. "Hey! Hello?" I start coughing.

The sounds barely make it out of my mouth and hardly make a dent in the air. The quiet of the forest is so powerful and heavy that it makes me feel instantly ashamed to be out in the woods, yelling to nothing at all.

Turning to go back the way I came, I'm suddenly blinded by the low glaring sun, which seems to be pelting me from every direction. It's overwhelming and I almost lose my balance again because it's all coming at me like strong wind or fire hoses or something.

It probably takes me a full minute to realize that it's mirrors. Hundreds of them. Some have been stuck in the knots of trees and the trees have gobbled them up, breathed them in, scarred up around the jagged edges and healed flush with the trunk. Others are wedged in the crooks of branches, or dangling from vines high up out of reach. Looking into the trunk of one tree, I see a thousand trees, like this tree has its own interior forest. And then looking into the branches of another tree, I see myself floating up high, looking back down at me. It's obviously years of work. It's mesmerizing.

As I'm marveling, spinning, I stumble over something behind me. I recognize it immediately: my father's Lazyboy. The bottom is engulfed—its rusted springs intertwined and anchored with weeds and vines, and the arms are worn down to smooth, bare, wood.

I sit myself in the chair for at least an hour, listening. The small noises are like sparks in the snow, quick and bright and instantly so long gone that you wonder if they were ever there at all. Every time a branch snaps or a bird takes off, I'm on it. I'm a living, breathing, antennae. A human motion detector.

When I look down at the exposed wooden carcass of the chair, in my mind, I can see her arms: my mother's. I can see that they are no longer the puffy pale chicken wings that hung over the sofa all those years ago. They're nut brown now and they're old.

Pared down to sinewy muscle and thick, weathered skin, those arms are out here somewhere. This is something I know like I know my own name.

My mother's name is Beatrice. Bea. I guess she doesn't want to see me, I don't know what else to think. I picture her in a showdown with Madeline, my mother becoming less inhibited, the house less inhabited with every passing day. Turning loose, growing wild. I think of my own complicated life, the intricate webs, the careful articulation, and the lengths I go to keep it all under my hat. A person has to be aware, sharp, perceptive, or the world might just overcome them. I think of myself as the deep-pocketed mountainous terrain, protected, and my mother as the flat open fields, exposed.

When it finally occurs to me to call Byron again, it's late afternoon. I try his cell phone: no answer. I call his office and his secretary says he's gone for the day. I call our house:

"Hellooo."

It's a woman's voice. It must be his mother. She sounds chipper, musical. She sounds British. I wonder where she picked that up. I swear, people with money!

I thought his parents would be gone by now, I thought he said they were just going to be in town for one night. I hang up the phone immediately, call the cell phone back, and leave another voice mail message. "Hi By, it's me. Just checking in, wanted to say hi to your folks. Tell them I said hi. See you tomorrow."

I go through a mental checklist. It's all wrapped up tight. My mother is gone. She's gone out of bounds, undetectable. Queen of the Woodland Critters.

I pick up a piece of the porch wreckage, the molding I accidentally ripped from the door. I open my suitcase for the first time and dig out some dark red nail polish. On the hood of my car, in the dying sunlight and holding my car keys in my teeth, I write my mother's name: *Bea*. I wedge it up over the door, next to the sign that says *Madeline*.

Diorama of a People, Burning

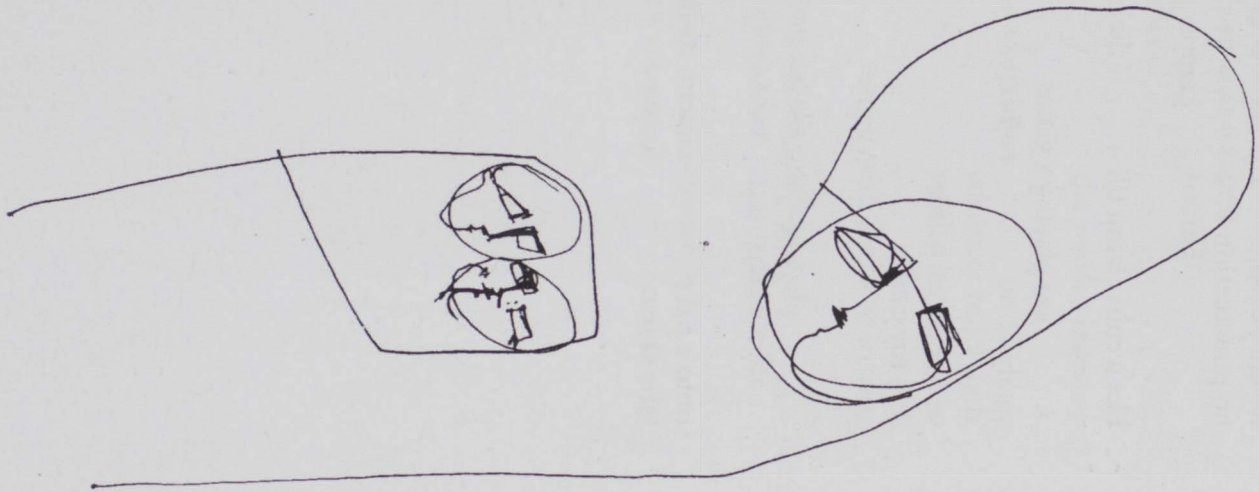
The peculiar grandiosity of every small thing. A mouth touched of water. Mandala light like wind through a face, split open. Desperate people do desperate things. A kid drives his car to the middle of nowhere and blankets it in gasoline. The switchblade sky anonymous, colorless. Protoplasmic striving, all the way down. As he walks away his friend lights the match too soon, and his face the ashen flavor of need, for weeks. The particular circularity of every small living in every small town. A bicycle tire floating in water. Mud-spangled smoke and fucking mosquitoes. He believes his wife's best friend the most beautiful woman he's ever seen naked, but she'll never know. The sound of sex switches over to sleep. Softly breathing under pillow. *You've got to tell her*, says his friend, but he can't. He who argues with the fool himself becomes a fool. Most men are two fools. Like the father of four who snuck into a field to steal anhydrous ammonia. Afraid to call the cops, he withered in dew, scrotum clean off, his eyes black stars, bad wounds toward nothing. And then morning. No meth. Recall: the sun's only movement is constant explosion. So it is cosmic, in a sense, to burn oneself up. Pastor Lisa of the First United Methodist Church is a light to the locals. She keeps the parsonage neat, always working the garden, full of roses, red and white. She led an elegant prayer for the boy who died by cigarette, siphoning gas from a school bus. Desperate people do desperate things. Pastor Lisa buys a gun and swallows it wholly, brains in the bookshelf, her garden freshly weeded and blooming.

Her Problem of Gravity

Dressed all in yellow despite her pale skin, Isabella coming slowly down the hillside, white umbrella overhead, thick punch the sun. It is mid-July in the mid-Midwest. No rain for days. There are swallows humming circles overhead, tracing a slipstream she will try to enter into, never find her way out of. The streets below are mostly vacant: some garbage, some couples, Alessandro sweeping and smoking in front of his Italian café. Old men hawking chaw toward the cracks in the sidewalk, talking the weather. Mostly not talking. Isabella is a bell, a ringing in the bones. She is broke stone silent. Coming down from the timber, counting out boxcars, fingering the hem of her blustering skirt. There is solitude in knowing. A depth one can swallow. There is no rain for days. Crumbled in key places, the streets mostly marrow. As in every small moment in every small town, a child loses grip of the only balloon. There is sadness in the alders and life in the water. The sun did not rise in the morning. Will not ever set, ever. This is scientific fact, and yet. The trains move only at midnight, hauling grain across the veins of American progress, built of course by Chinese slaves, now tightrope-walked by children on their way to the sewage lagoon. The mission: unknown, but there is always destination. Which leads us back to Isabella and her yellowing gravity. The pull of the earth upon those who found heaven, covered in weeds, choked in wildflowers.

Everyone Loves Spook McConnell

Leaned against weather, the earth long and slow. Think fields of dark sky. Think only to rise. The riverbed streets. Hands everywhere reaching, the texture of bread. It didn't take long to know something was off. He couldn't learn like the others, would wail without reason and tear off his clothes. Instead of high school he stayed home with his mother, helped daddy work the land when he could. *Got good hands and a bad head.* Born in the wrong body. His days in the woods. Spilled downhill, the liquid sun, the tidal flooding of deep grass. Now in his fifties, still living with mom, he's become a kind of mascot, never missing a game. He walks around town with a neon fanny pack full of found change, overpaying children at lemonade stands, petting the strays and giving them names. Think crush with eyes shut, a strange-boned hope. He would come to the library to visit Isabella working the desk. *Why you so sad?* he would ask. So he brought her a lump whittled out of a log. He called it a boat. *I'm sorry, Spook,* she said, *I can't take that.* So he came back again, having whittled the boat down to a canoe. *I'm sorry, Spook. You should keep it, sweetheart.* No one realized the sky was already underwater. That the trees will wash together, full of birds like a netting overhead. In all directions swelling, thunders in the deep breath. A ghost in his fist, Spook came back with a bag full of shavings and tossed them in the air: *It is raining, Isabella. You should grab your umbrella.*



Small Water

we are playing a game theres
no punctuation in it
grapple to limb to limb

like a cubs clamp till the others whimper
we
are playing a game no poems in it
surely & no radios only

waterfalls we prime with a bucket
& a toy canoe
a game we are always

playing your seeds a seat
a lacy bract its the funnest

onto a baby saguaro sprout
who thirsts for next to nothing

Nettles

i sought an euphemism for the slaughter
shed thats what we were
behind
a spindrift of wool
on a nettle
the weeds baroque

chapels were interrupting
the clouds whatever had a path
was on it

nettle thorned with icicles of irritant
dew
you say the bristles
immaculate a braille fur

you reach for them *comma*
snap when i tell you to stop

From Time to Time by the Skin of Your Face

Things past tumble back, thoughts gather
thoughts: dreadnaught, thickset, a roman
candle. It is a bedroom that wants
a southern addition; it swelters and finds
license. Idle hands, young shoulder, sweat lines
from a neck to a back, a father stitching
a wound in his arm before it can finish
what it was saying about the godseat. Or was it
the goblet? Numinous iota, I dare you. Race
to the pilings and back. Like ants bearing mint
across a white counter, it is too much
of a good thing. Nostalgia, the distance a sigh
travels before reaching its source. A torment
disguised as reverie. It is written on the side
of my skull. Did I have a twin? I had notions
that part of me grew toward the earth.

Is Another Appear

In a glass room in the tree ferns. Sleeping,
a frond stretches its legs. Lady and salvaged
furniture. I want to take so much. Air
fern is an animal dyed green. Amanita,
freckled skin hidden in the mossery, veiled
truffles on a communion tray. The lake
is in the sky and belowground, some bodies
once loved on their featherbeds. Rheumy-eyed,
dolorous, typical. In caverns of misplaced sentiment
they linger but she is already big as a starling
in the fallible night, in a head made of windows.

Middle West

He can understand what the 'home-folks' in the small towns of the Middle West are talking about.

1928 usage of "middle west," *THE CENTURY MAGAZINE,*
OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY

Here, in this heartland, home-folks live and farm the earth, their elbows jutting from fields at angles, their sweat dewing the land as far as the eye can see. Here lives a woman with a bosom so ample, so significant, so loose with connotation her breasts, working entirely on their own, can push a still-baking apple pie right back into that oven, granting that tart fruit some more time to soften. Here, practitioners of soil gaze into the distance, their faces filled in with whiteness, their tongues forming around chitchat that refuses to offend, their mouths rounding off vowels into tidy little bits: *Yah. Yah. Oh, yah did? Yah? Oh. Yah. I s'pose so.* This Midwest will take a long time to drive past, its road signs continuously birthing new states: Ohio Indiana Illinois Michigan Wisconsin Minnesota Iowa Missouri. This land passes, offering itself both as windowed Nowhere and as navigational device, a means of assuring travelers that the long highways on which they wheel themselves are quite rightly blurring them by, heading them, that is, in some other direction.

The Midwest, as murky passing referent, also makes possible the kind of punch lines paired with laugh tracks, what Hollywood calls LFNs ("laughter from nowhere"). Born of the 1950s sitcom, the laugh track consists of the right kind of laughter (nothing spastic, no guffawing) cued at an exact moment for the purposes of aiding the audience in understanding exactly what it is this particular world finds

funny. Each perfect laugh of a perfect duration also, and this proves important, perfects the writer's vision, he who can't help himself, he who will hide his smile when each of his jokes land like pats on the back. And so a writer at *The Boston Globe* takes a moment, for example, on January 18, 2010, to look in on Fond du Lac, Wisconsin:

> **Wis. man cited for 'rocking out' to John Denver**
>
> Police responding to a complaint of loud noise have cited a Fond du Lac man for "rocking out" to the music of John Denver. A police (sic) who responded to the man's apartment last week could hear Denver's music through the door. [...]
>
> When asked why he had the music so loud, the man said he was "rocking out."
>
> *The Reporter* newspaper in Fond du Lac reported that the 42-year-old was cited for unnecessary loud noise. The ticket could result in a fine of about $210.
>
> The late Denver is known for such hits as "Rocky Mountain High" and "Take Me Home, Country Roads."

"Midwest," the writers write, LFN, rising up between the lines. Laughter cued, coordinates aligned, this is the where and when of a tidiness running deep. Indeed, the Midwestern man need not appear in Boston long for his rocking out to become both a place and a perpetual action; in minds humming with consciousness all the way up and down the eastern seaboard, Fond du Lac Man continuously rocks out to John Denver, continuously earns himself a citation and continuously turns back, with an automated swivel of hips, to begin the process all over again. Geographically speaking, this is the making of an island, a way of mapping out impassable waters, willing a neat world to circle up.

The Middle West region is oddly named, because the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri, which make it up, are really neither middle nor west.

1949 usage of "middle west," *OXFORD JUNIOR ENCYCLOPEDIA*,
OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY

The island surfaced and then stood, seismic and still dripping, the waters of Lake Superior pouring down its pines. On the map one can see it: the wavering outline of a real-looking island, one that would prove little more than pen jagging mimicked nature onto paper, an island fictitious, made-up, or maybe, just a bit misunderstood. Isle Philipeaux, as it was named, first appeared on a published map in 1744, second in size only to Superior's largest island, the existentially verifiable Isle Royale.

During the century and a half that preceded the island's sudden apparition, French men like Nicollet, Joliet, and Marquette, as well as a number of Jesuits, had shown great pluck and endurance in blundering about this portion of the New World, wandering up and down rivers, giving names to Indian nations, seeking the souls of humans, the skins of animals, and exploring the contours of the rivers and lakes they named, mapped, re-named, and then mapped again. Nicollet, who believed himself in search of the Northwest Passage, that precious portal to the orient, is said to have carried across present-day Wisconsin the clothes he would wear when finally he met the Chinese emperor of Cathay. And yet all that erring had been more or less long ago by 1744 when Jean-Nicolas Bellin made "Map of Canada's Lakes". By contrast, this map, in a cartographic moment we'd recognize as progress, gives an impression of the accuracy we've come to know. These white men having, at long last, stretched their fingers the entire way around all five of the Great Lakes, inscribed these bodies of water with the names by which we now know them, drawing them in sizes and shapes recognizable to the modern eye.

Though the apparition of Isle Philippeaux came suddenly, without explanation, it nevertheless found its grand way into the world, even working itself into the Treaty of Paris, signed in 1783, which made of it a reference point—by decree it would sit just south of the border dividing British North America from the United States. Reluctant, perhaps, to shirk such a duty, Phillipeaux stood this ground for a long time, almost an entire century, last appearing on a map in 1842.

From air? Out of lake? Finally, who placed the island there? Bellin, that careful maker of maps, can hardly be a point of origin. Like most mapmakers, he got his information from elsewhere and never scoured the lake for land himself, his work taking place instead at a dry desk with clean plume in hand.

Some historians scrutinize Gaspard-Joseph Chaussegros de Lery and his son of the same name, since they likely penned the charts Bellin drew from in making "Map of Canada's Lakes". But even this pair, who had, in fact, traveled together in New France, gathered their lake map materials from the sketches and assertions of others. And, besides, even if Gaspard-Joseph Junior—apprenticed to his father at only 12 years of age—did the mischievous deed, why wouldn't he have given in to a more useful caprice, naming the island after the baker's teenage daughter, for example, Marie-Therese, she who would surely speak to him now? *Je viens de vous creer une isle!*, he could have called out to her in the street.

Then there's the fur trader, Louis Denys de La Ronde, a French navy officer who, in 1731, took command of the fur post on Superior's Madeline Island. La Ronde, apparently, had heard Indians tell of copper on Superior's islands and worked out a deal for himself: he'd build a boat and explore all these islands in exchange for nine years of monopolizing

the post's trade. If we doubt this character, we'd notice that, as he searched year after year for islands hiding copper deposits, as he moved around that lake, taking what samples he could find, enough islands and inlets and harbors turned up for the purpose of assigning the place names that honored his partners and superiors. If we want to believe in his honest mistake, however, we'd instead remember that he spent much time out there, on his boat, in those vast waters, looking.

It's possible too that the Ojibwe—referred to in the record simply as "the Indians" or "local Indians"—simply needed to find ways of making the burden of possessing native information more rewarding, reciprocal in some way. And so, having known for a long time that some of Lake Superior's islands contained copper, someone told a rapt La Ronde, on the verge of boarding his new vessel, about a ghost woman living on a large island in the middle of those deep waters. This, the informant told La Ronde, was a woman with a bosom so large, so significant, so laden with the copper she formed into medallions, that the clanking layers of her colossal necklace—the size of seven men—actually reflected every beaming ray of the sun, thus draping this mysterious island of treasure in great darkness. Then, maybe, under the clear light of that day, on a beach with buttered popcorn provided for all, they sat to watch him set sail.

Another possibility is that the island decided one day to subsume itself, out of grief, or out of the simple but exquisite irritation at never being found, at a game of hide-and-seek that never showed any mercy.

Another possibility is that the island's still there, swirling away from the scrutiny of satellite images, or permanently ensconced in a rare system of fog so thorough in its efforts to cloud all sense of direction it can actually render itself, not to mention the land over which it hovers, a fiction.

The trouble is that for most Americans the Mid-West, like other regional identities, is less a place on the map than a state of mind.

1985 usage of "midwest," *DAILY MAIL*, OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY

John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads" takes a loose hold of the airwaves, filling the car with its nasal desire for place, this one called West Virginia: "Take me home, country roads/ Take me home, now country roads/ Take me home, now country roads". The northbound highway looks dry and hot, the windows have rolled themselves down, and—be still, traveler heart—appearing before us is a summer day and a state of mind, a moment lending itself well to rounding off fictions, to the finding of false islands.

The air from the window waxes poetic, making a masterpiece of each free tendril of hair and we decide, in that moment of freedom, that it's time to ready our messages. We've worked hard on the words we'd like to leave behind by way of explanation, both for the media who, in a yawning way, might one day attempt to track us, trying to pin this whole story down, as well as for the writers of dictionaries, those abstract persons we love to fret over, praying they'll be meticulous in transcribing our work. We pull in close to fast food chains and gas stations and place shiny acrylic stickers on exterior walls, gas pumps, and bathrooms doors.

WHICH WAY TO THE MIDWEST?
MIDDLING WEST AND LOVING IT.
SEEKING THE CARTOGRAPHIC TRUTH.

The thrill comes, without a doubt, from pulling away in a clamor of haste, the rubber of the tires peeling off the road, the car squawking, the driver unable to suppress a fist pump. Soon after, there's little but the mechanical hum of the car moving forward plus the pregnant quiet of passengers, explorers who inadvertently dampen maps with the grip of excited hands, explorers whose eyes land on the outside in long and sideways looks, minds on the mapped contours of Isle Philippeaux once again.

The ghost of that island has even written us letters. *You are welcome any time,* she writes in perfect script, *don't call beforehand, just drop by, I make apple pies at the drop of a hat!* And so our mouths water as we imagine the impromptu making of pies that will commence when finally we find her, when, with great effort, we pull our wooden canoe up onto the pebbled beach and climb out, stretching through the smiles and yawns that anticipate, already, the island's great gratitude, the host of secrets to be served up to us on coppery plates.

We're aware of our foolishness, aware we might be disappointed, aware that the Midwest, like many of the earth's places, tilts toward under-imagined and overly caricatured, that it might not be a definite place at all, let alone a concrete navigational direction. And yet we go, hoping we might find something, even imagining for a moment what the signage on the island might look like: "Middle West Passage This Way," the largest arrow will point. Or, "Welcome, Friends, to The Magnetic Midwest." Or, underneath that one, "Site of The Original John Denver Wax Museum."

And so we keep the car rolling. And so we go anyway, since we can and because we feel that we must, taking with us the maps that we've made as well as the irreverence needed to wander over them lost. In us we keep a tight hold of the desire to scuff that map's straight lines, to mark them momentarily with the traveling imprints of our left foot wonder and our right foot doubt. In the end, it's the map's captives, islands made but never seen, that keep us moving, middling, as they say, west.

Nullstellensatz

The plains around the volcano
were littered with the bodies of broken
horses, was one way of putting it.
We studied the video
of the ice-fishing championships
again and again, sixty little vice windows
coming unbraided.

The childhoods of Russian soldiers
were soft. Tourists paid
to leave their thumbprints in the matrix.

Belief, not beauty, is the basis of
autobiography, a sort of faith-healing
technique
promoted by the bourgeoisie.

In all the pharmacies, shadows
with the shape
of a governor, glancing backwards.
What a messy empire.

You cast your vote, and a corpse
adds itself to the line
in the government-subsidized cafeteria.

Kiln-fired. A postcard album
salvaged from where the two largest
rivers intersected
in the form of a panopticon,
doo-wah-diddy-dum.

It smells like bacon, but it's not. Really,
it's just something else
to wear on your head: I mean,
It's the *war* we're winning, after all.

The Monkey Cages in Winter

It's not as if you weren't happy.
You had your Jeep Cherokee, your stained t-shirt
reading I AM NOT YOUR EVIL EMPIRE,
and even if the snow was drifting
in from Lake Ontario, Jack-in-box, corpse-
in-copse, everything fit perfectly well

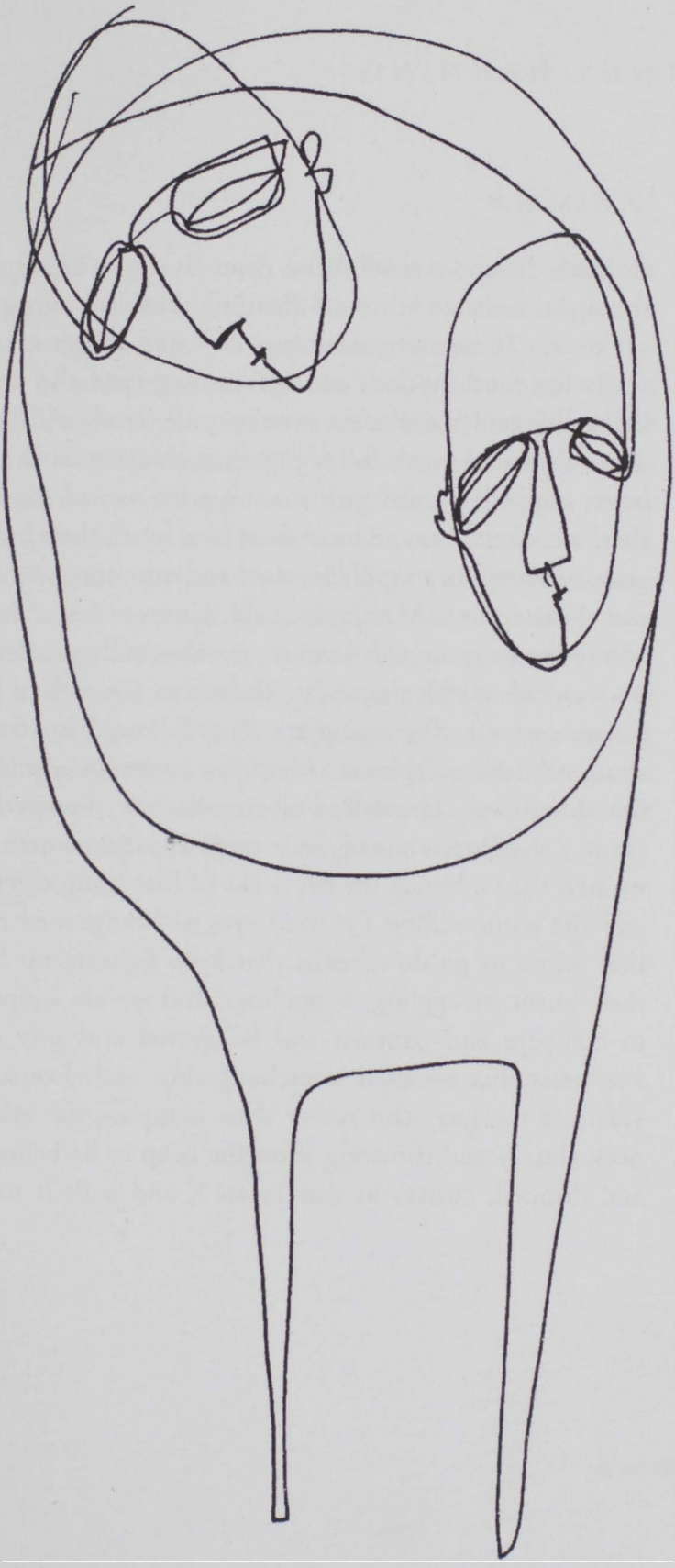
inside the ghosts you were weaving
from the stones that had fallen from the castle wall.
You checked the mile marker sign
along the suburban highway
against your body's natural temperature
set loose amid the fissured animals

nobody stops to gather, or report to the police.
This is what cell phones are for!
trumpeted the enormous billboards
erected by the pilots' union. And that was fine, too,
face cards in the spokes of some childhood
orienteering extravaganza. In this film,

you ride a jet ski toward some Carribean paradise,
except for the long, slow tracking shot
of you methodically erasing your incorrect answers
from a tattered book of crossword puzzles.
So many things we've known
began as skills and then grew into something

more puzzling than the twisted contrails
fireworks leave against the bright patronymic
of *I'll have what she's having.*
When you sign the papers, you're reasonably sure
the dinosaurs really are extinct, although
this doesn't keep you from hoping:

that you will be the first to photograph
the funnel descending from the gravid supercell,
that the human body attracts oxygen,
that where I'm calling from
is just one more story we'll all agree on
later, a tent folded inside some color we left there.



Animals

Animals die and we eat them. Animals die so we can eat them. Animals are born and then we kill them, so we can eat them. There are generations of living things created solely for consumption, and it's nothing new, the use of living things. It's evolution—we're quite handy at it now. There are stacked pens full of big white chickens, with their beaks clipped off: Broilers, a subspecies named for how they're cooked. They've lived their lives when their breasts grow so heavy they topple forward and cannot regain their feet. White meat. Maximum yield. Consumable men are a different story though—we are equals-equals-equals—so it's an accident that they exist. The end of the path of least resistance, least effort, not particularly followed, but trailed along until it's overgrown. Have you ever noticed that all the down-and-out-plotline-movies have a meatpacking plant, a slaughterhouse, a cattle yard? The dismal men and women shown beside the slit necks of foot-hung chickens and the panic-rolling fist-sized eyes of bludgeoned cows that refuse to go down easy, that keep fighting up from their knees, struggling, struggling. And we are supposed to compare and contrast and be moved and pity man and beast that are used interchangeably, and always, the villain is the guy who rather than snapping the rabbit's neck cleanly and throwing it on the heap to be beheaded and skinned, crosses its ears in an X and nails it to the

wall still living, and later on he'll be the gang leader in the gang rape scene and he'll have the harshest laugh and the most glittering eyes and when the credits are rolling they'll be whispering through the theater, about knowing a man's character by his treatment of animals, and even as the audience is speaking, shuffling down the tight rows between the seats, a sheep's eyes are being lined with kohl and a sugar cube offered and its throat slit, and a cow wreathed in flowers, artery punctured, still dies more slowly than we could bear, but, it was always meant to die. All things are, so all things do, and so a cat is on fire, running willy-nilly, back and forth, to and fro, shrieking like a meteor, and there are maybe four boys laughing together, watching and washing gasoline from their hands with a garden hose, and a fifth boy has run away. So he'll be the one that doesn't make it, strung up, cut, or brought to his knees.

Zombie Love

Everyone is fine this morning. How are you
fine, fine, but I want to speak with you

this morning, sunlight on the cobwebs
of the throat. Clouds being clouds

pretending wind can't shift
and ruin them. Are you ruined too?

Let's be ruined together. The wind is a blanket
opening, a blush of heat. Brazil.

I wish you a pillow everywhere
for your head. I wish you a soft death.

This bed, big enough for two.

Night with Night

In couplets one expects a couple
in a tree. Birds scribble their fury across the sky.

—

Say sky here and blue opens. Say *black*
and night throws its drink.

—

The sky reminds us of an invitation
elsewhere. Even a storm has its charm.

—

Who can complain about the sky
when we have each other?

—

If there is a hand in the sky.
If we had a hand in it.

—

The sky feeds itself to itself, a furnace
of roses and blood.

—

The sky drops an aluminum eye,
rolls its grief in ink.

—

Who are we, sky of reflection,
who wince, who weep?

—

The sky is a lake
of needles. The sky, a field of teeth.

—

The sky wings overhead
or the sky falls and blackens us.

Dear Master,

I remain your sweet
erratic, your eviscerated
wind who records every

leaving. This is hovering
now feel my high
heel on your lip?

I will not be
embodied, fingerprints
on the doorknob and the scrape

of click. A siren sears
far then near, smoke
catches your fire

escape. *Fire, fire, fire.*
I'll be your match
blackened weather.

A GIRL CAME HERE & CRASHED

She was her own gasoline fire,
her own meth lab.
When she swung hard, too soon & deep.

Her own jet pack, oxygen
depletion
on the wrong side of the galaxy.

Did you know the earliest maps
were not of earth but of heaven?

When she palmed her own fortune,
her lucky day was 100.

She was her own algebraic x,
the number she never solved for,
her own Rocky Horror Picture night.

The Mississippi River flowed backwards
for two days after an 1820 earthquake.

When she walked, she knocked
her bones together in song,
a shutter speed.

In a good story, everything is pushed
into existence by something else.

Isn't this what we label debris?

Night Ride Home

My brother would call to say
keep me awake

or
help me, Obi Wan Kenobi,
you're my only hope

He'd say, *I'm driving home*
& I'd think where is that today?

Examples:

We'd watch Stars Wars every
Christmas Eve waiting for our dad
who showed up but never came

highway lights, holiday smears

in driver's ed one girl asked me
What are you looking at
Retarded Arms & Legs?

I sat on the edge of the desk
& watched through the front porch
screen as my brother double-fisted
oak trees

I'd color-code our answers
depending on what we needed
FIRE we went
when broken or RIVER
when safe

My brother likes to sleep in cars
a childhood leftover
I slide in beside
like Alice in Wonderland

if you accelerate fast enough you can
make the car jackrabbit
engine over end

Dorris

Applaud the Machine

The phonograph knows more about us than we know ourselves.
THOMAS ALVA EDISON, 1888

i. Tone Test, Carnegie Hall, 1920

Behold the Diamond Disc
and our lovely vocalist, Miss Anna Case.

A layer of sound breathes
beneath an exact layer of sound. It is unblemished,

pure: applaud the machine. Listen:
you can't parse it, can't distinguish one from one.

Her voice, a perfect copy of her voice.
This is not representation, not documentation,

not a recording. I have ignited sound, conceived
an authentic music, rid of the clutter.

ii. Paranormal

Once, I was content with exactitude.
But isn't there more? What we need

is a Phonograph with a Soul. Imagine
the possibility: to call out to ghosts—

of ideas, ancestors, spent desires.
Maybe Marconi was right: no sound

has ever died. There is a secret knowledge
in the cylinder: the hills and dales,

the diamond stylus, the locked
language of the dead.

iii. Mood Change Party

We'll throw a Mood Change Party: listen
to my re-creations, my sonic communications,

and chart your changes: now sad,
now joyful, once troubled,

now carefree. Can you feel
the ghost moving through?

Are you transformed? Applaud
the machine.

My Mother's Disappearance

In the picture, they're awkwardly posed. They're trying to re-enact that Chagall painting, the one where a smiling man in a suit has one arm outstretched, holding the hand of a woman floating sideways, seven feet off the ground. My mother's on a ladder, but you don't see the ladder in the picture. It does look like she's flying, and not just because you can't see her feet, but because of this strange, giddy joy spreading across her face, coming out her laughing mouth and eyes.

In the picture, my father's smile is rigid. He's a little drunk, although it can't be past three in the afternoon. It's one of those days where he quits the office early and trudges the ten blocks home, pulling at his tie and wondering if my mother remembered to pick up more lime for his gin. "Being a lawyer for crummy people is like being eaten away by battery acid," he always said. That's how the whole thing started—with Dad getting tipsy and coming up with a wild idea.

She, of course, agrees. She would like him to come home full of charming notions every day, like before they were married and he'd show up on her doorstep and ask if she'd like to have a picnic on the moon. They didn't really go to the moon, of course. They went to the lake. But Dad would drive her there blindfolded, and carry her down to the eastern beach, the one covered in smooth, pale boulders. "The moon!" he'd declare, whipping off the blindfold. So, I have to think that it was some glimmer of my father's former quirks that led her up the ladder that day.

She suffers through four of Dad's attempts to get back in position after setting the automatic timer on the camera. And

he's so excited at the success of the fifth and final take that he lets go of my mother's hand to pump his fists in the air. That's when she falls, her legs tangling, breaking, in the rungs of the ladder.

It took my mother two years to untangle herself. And when she finally did, she strode back in the house, where my father stood, shocked, a slice of lime poised over his glass. She pulled him outside and said, "Watch this." Her feet lifted off the ground, her body light as a dandelion seed. She floated over his head, bending sideways so she looked exactly like the woman in the Chagall painting, but when my father reached out for her hand, she didn't reach back. She drifted clear away and was never seen again.

Wolf Goes Down for a Cup

At noon Wolf baby-steps out of the Frontier Assisted Living facility. He comes down the stairs one at a time in that peculiar old-folk way that renders a staircase not as a single problem to be solved but as a grouping of many small problems with no clear end in sight.

Once sidewalk is achieved the algebra of the aged proceeds and develops by way of an ever lengthening series of equations down the street, nearly twelve blocks across town, to the final, ultimate, destination—Mark'z Coffee House and Panini Palace. Specifically, a plush overstuffed chair, upholstered in a phosphorescent sort of green velour fabric that exudes odors of cooked bacon and mildew upon one's acceptance into its embrace.

To say that everyday at noon Wolf walks to Mark'z Coffee House and Panini Palace is to insult walk as abstract idea. Wolf does not walk. Wolf does not even shuffle. Most accurately, Wolf oozes, like a garden slug or the small hand on a clock, one of those things in that, upon observance, there is no noticeable change of position until you happen to look away and look back and then Wolf is *there*, not there. Just a little further on down the sidewalk. It has been said that God almighty created the world in seven days, if this is true then on the first minute of the first day he must have created Wolf and got him started across town just so he'd make it before Sunday, the seventh day, the day that Mark (owner of Mark'z), like God, closes up shop and takes a well deserved rest.

Wolf lost his driver's license some time around the first Gulf War conflict after an incident in which he failed to see a group of protesters standing on the sidewalk in front of the post

office and accidently parallel parked his Le Sabre on the foot of Margot Miller—former soft porn model turned political activist and prescription drug addict. At the time, popular opinion in the police station was that the crushing of Margo Miller's foot in and of itself was not sufficient cause for the confiscation of Wolf's license, however, the fact that at the time of the incident Margot Miller was standing nearly fifteen feet off the street (a distance that required Wolf to back over a eight inch curb and halfway across the post office lawn in order to parallel park on her foot) meant that there was reason to believe that Wolf was a danger to the town.

So now, Wolf is on foot, rendered (by the conjoined forces of law and nature) a slow force, stale molasses in a cold environment. Around noon he solves anew the daily stair equation in front of the Frontier Assisted Living Facility and makes his way down the sidewalk like mold growing on bread. He wears a quilted plaid jacket and aquamarine cotton sweat pants with stretch-elastic cuffs and waistband. His shoes are of the lace-less, hook and loop strap closure variety with thick grey rubber soles. His cane has a molded plastic pistol grip, stainless steel adjustable shaft, and two short outriggers on either side of the rubber tip upon which are fastened two small wheels.

Wolf has very little hair remaining on his head and the few strands that are left he gathers into a sparse gray-black pony tail tied up with a piece of mint flavored dental floss. He has exactly seven teeth left in his skull. The skin of his face is grey and soft as rotting newspaper. Wolf also has a small crescent moon tattooed in dark blue ink on his cheek under his rheumy left eye. The moon is positioned as if it were a single, indigo, moon-shaped tear about to wane from the cheekbone of the sky.

As Wolf makes his way down the street he passes the lawyer's office, the chiropractor's office, the do-it-yourself car and dog wash, the other chiropractor's office and the quick-stop, where an attendant, with bones discs in each ear the

size of tomato soup cans, cleans up a diesel spill his cigarette hanging loosely from the corner of his mouth. As Wolf passes, the attendant says, "Hey, how you doing man," to Wolf, who says nothing, which prompts the attendant after a significant pause to say, "Well, I'm doing good myself old man, fuck you very much." To which Wolf says nothing.

Wolf continues past the Laundromat, the Chinese place, the Mexican place, the vegetarian place, the smoothie shack, and another chiropractor's office. Before he gets to Mark'z Coffee House and Panini Palace he passes The Mystic Feather, a new and used sacred artifacts trading post, an establishment that long ago Wolf himself had founded. Long ago when Wolf's shoes still had laces. Long ago before he parallel parked his Le Sabre on Margot Miller's Birkenstock. Long ago before the First Gulf War conflict. Long ago before Wolf's tears became singular, permanent, moon shaped and blue.

Inside the Mystic Feather are many things. Many artifacts, both used and new. There are dream catchers woven from rubber bands, dream catchers in a vast array of shapes and sizes, specimens with hoops as big around as tractor tires and webbing made of tightly stretched blue rubber bands like the sort used to bunch asparagus at the grocery store. From these—dream catcher for dreamers of industrial strength dreams—all the way down to those no bigger around than a dime with insides twisted from the miniscule rubber bands found on orthodontic brace work. Beautiful, these, minute, catchers of hummingbird dreams, sized just so to fit in a pregnant woman's distended navel, placed just so to snare the dreams of the unborn, unbearable fetal dreams of cold, dreams of drowning in air, dreams of the severed cord, intolerable, clairvoyant, womb dreams.

Beside the dream catchers, The Mystic Feather offers for sale: incense sticks of course (in sixty four flavors), but also braided bundles of sweet grass, soapstone pipe stems,

hand carved beads, strange melon-headed dolls made from dried corn husks and human hair, arrowheads in both ancient and contemporary models, animal skins tanned with borax (packed in mothballs), and a few dusty packs of baseball cards, the old-timey kind that come with a stick of crumbly pink bubble gum inside the wrapper. And then there are the carvings. Safely ensconced behind thick layers of smudged glass, out of the reach of thieves and horny adolescent boys, and outraged but equally horny middle aged church women, the carvings sit, gleaming the dull honest gleam of hand polished bone.

The figurines are arranged in rows on a piece of dusty red velvet, a neat regiment on parade in the army of the obscene. The female figures have disproportionately large pendulous breasts and full stomachs, hips and breasts like stacked scoops of vanilla ice cream just starting to melt. The male figures are short, squat, and strait, with erect members jutting out massively above their square heads. No features, just blank bone faces and rough hewn genitalia, bone bellies and breasts, bone vaginas and vulvas, bone thighs, bone penises, full bone wombs. Here—in a glass display case half obscured by a packrat's nest of moldering esoteric volumes and a thick coating of incense stick ash—lies the remnants of a man's life, a study in the reproductive particulars. The carvings warm to the touch and exuding the scalded milk smell of cut bone, some still smudged indigo with the fallen crescent moon tears of their maker.

The Mystic Feather is owned now by Wolf's son, Charley, and the store frequently smells like the barbecue flavored chicharrones he likes to eat while he tends the register. Charley has thinning hair that he keeps cropped short about the ears and flat on top. His wife is a weaver of rubber band dream catchers and at any given time there are hoops hanging in various states of completion in the small bedroom of their

mobile home. Charley hasn't had a dream that he could remember since before he was a decorated marine in the first Gulf War conflict, he hasn't had a nightmare either, and he thinks that is a pretty good thing. Charley doesn't carve. Charley doesn't have a crescent moon tear drop tattoo. Charley doesn't wave when his father passes by on the sidewalk each day. Charley doesn't even flinch when, occasionally, he goes to Mark'z for a panini and feels that lunar gaze fall on him from a green overstuffed chair in the corner of the room.

Every day when Wolf reaches Mark'z he stands patiently, stooped within the threshold, until someone exits or enters and holds the door for him. He slowly navigates the maze of mismatched thrift store furniture, his wheeled cane leading the way to the green overstuffed chair and a position that offers a view of the sidewalk and dining area. Eventually, Mark brings Wolf a single steaming mug of black coffee, which Wolf accepts with a nod. At one time Wolf would leave a single, crumpled, dollar bill on the counter as payment on the way out. He hadn't done this in years. No one seemed to have noticed. Wolf never drank any of the coffee anyway; he had never cared for it. He used to roam vacant lots around town and gather mullen leaves that he dried and crushed for tea. Back when he owned the Mystic Feather he would spend hours happily sipping tea and carving bone. He fashioned tea bags out of cheesecloth filled thickly with dried mullen and tied at the top with mint flavored dental floss. He used the same bag all day and just refilled the hot water as needed. He liked the natural progression, the way the tea was strong and bitter in the morning, bracing the way it should be at that hour, and then the way it faded to just slightly grassy and herbal in the evening, soothing, and especially effective as a digestion aid. Wolf's supply of tea had run out long ago, the vacant lot where he used to gather mullen was now a mini-storage complex surrounded by razor wire topped chain link fence.

Wolf sits in his chair at Mark'z Panini Palace and no one pays him any mind, he is a silent moon orbiting a noisy planet. The place is full of young people with their hair cut at sharp angles and died alarming shades of red and turquoise and jet black. Mark has reggae music pumping loudly through speakers hidden by fake potted palms, some of them nearly fifteen feet tall, the plastic leaves brushing the hot ceiling lights. The kind of plastic potted palms that haven't be seen since the early Plasticiferous era at least. The air smells like bacon, and toasting ciabatta bread and coffee and melting plastic palm fronds and un-cleaned fish tanks. And there Wolf sits, a satellite, silent as all things are in space (even those falling out of rotation) blinking slowly in his green overstuffed chair, his coffee steaming quietly, untouched in the mug resting on a bony thigh.

• • •

At four o'clock Mark powers down the panini press. He dumps a black sodden mass of used coffee grounds into a five gallon bucket and sets it outside the back door. Later, he will carefully trowel the soggy coffee matter into the dank loam around the roots of his homegrown marijuana crop, a product he harvests, bags, labels and markets under the trade name Mark'z Ezprezzo Budz (LLC). Mark has been smoking marijuana seriously since he was twelve years old and is relatively certain that his constant use has rendered him infertile. Mark and his wife Edie are each thirty-five years old now and childless after ten years of marriage—childless, but not for lack of trying. On the Sundays when Edie is ovulating Mark rises first and heads down to the kitchen where he makes eight shots of strong espresso and fills a pitcher with ice water. He returns to the bedroom where he and Edie share a powerbar and gulp espresso and embark upon a caffeine stoked sex marathon that lasts until mid afternoon. At which point an exhausted Mark

does the crossword and re-hydrates while Edie reads, laying naked on her back on the bed with two pillows propping up her pelvis—to keep everything flowing downstream.

Sometimes they talk. Sometimes the usual nonsense after love things, sometimes hopeful things, sometimes they talked about Mark's spermatazoa as if they were a downtrodden sports team in need of a pep talk. Sometimes Edie says things like, "If I get pregnant this time will you still like me, you know not me, but, my body me? Things are going to stretch and change baby. I see other women in the gym all the time, wormy purple marks and sags, some of their boobs look like elf shoes, I mean, nipples like flesh thimbles. What then?"

"What then?" Mark says, "Well, then, we get you a boob job and we get to work trying to make that kid a sibling." Sometimes they would share a joint and get Chinese take-out for dinner. Sometimes Mark thought they would be children themselves, forever, unless they were able to create one of their own.

When his work is done Mark removes his panini stained apron and hangs it on a nail over the kitchen door. His thumb on the knob of the stereo brings the thumping reggae vibes to a halt. The kids with the sculpted hair are gone, the lunch crowd is long gone, in fact everyone is gone except for Wolf. Mark speaks to the half-bald dome of Wolf's heads sticking up over the back of the chair.

"I hate to restrict the flow of irie around here brother, but the time has come."

The words seem loud in the empty restaurant; they reverberate, bouncing without pause from thrift store chair to second hand table to the sticky floor to the coffee stained ceiling to Wolf, who says nothing. Wolf, who in ten years has never remained at Mark'z so much as one minute past three o'clock.

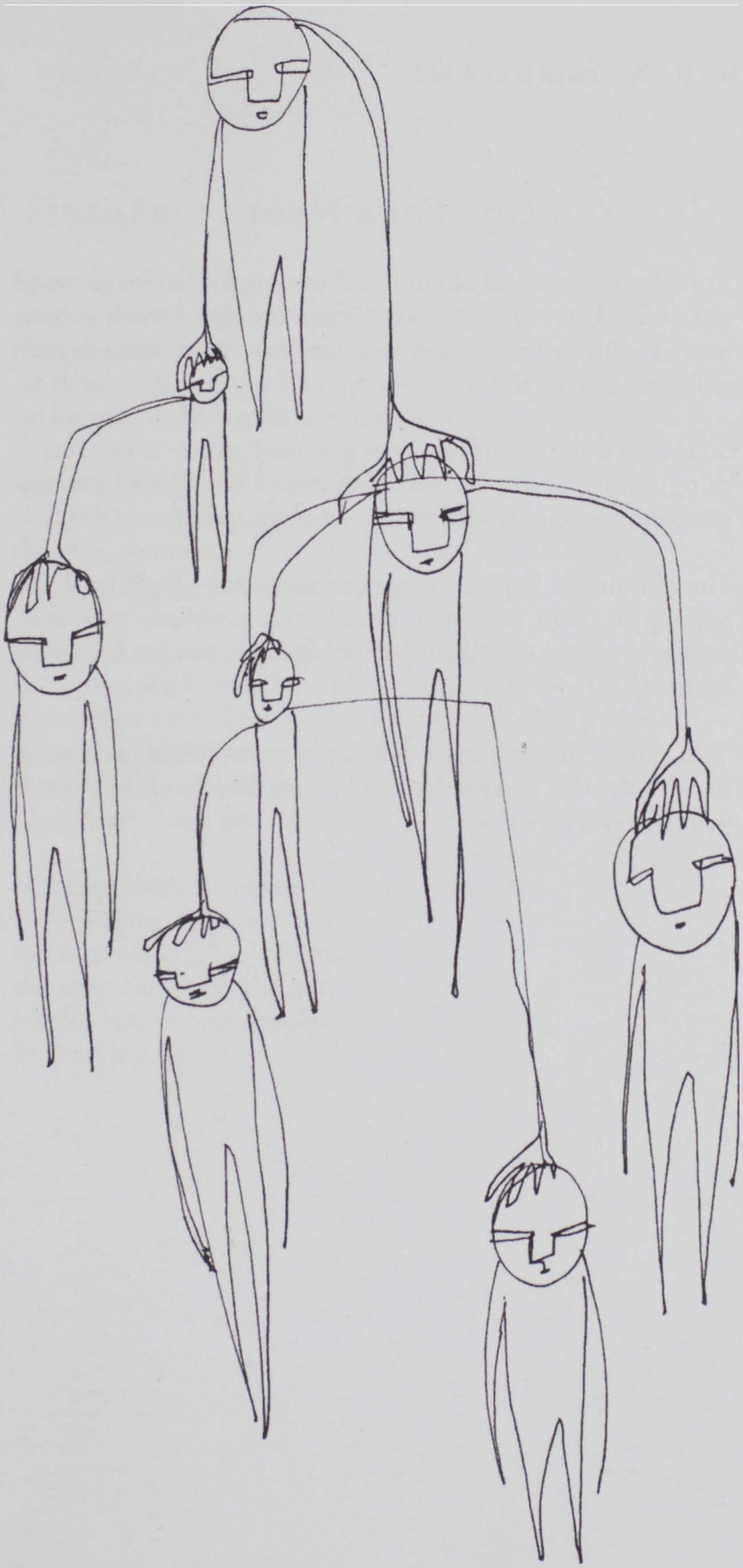
The sign in the window of the restaurant is a bright, orange neon tube light, shaped like a cup of coffee, with wavy

lines of steam rising from the rim. When Mark pulls the plug it pops once and goes dark and he stands there, holding the cord like a dead snake by the tail. "You don't have to go home," he says to Wolf without turning around, "but you can't stay here, brother." To which Wolf says nothing, and says nothing and says nothing.

On the morning of the day after Wolf's death, Mark rolls a joint the size of a carrot and smokes it down to his finger tips in the small bathroom off the kitchen of his restaurant. When this is done, he turns on the reggae and opens the doors and plugs in the open sign. He sprays the green velour overstuffed chair with lemon breeze air freshener and he makes espressos and lattes and Cajun style paninis and breves and mochas and Philly style paninis all the way through the lunch hour, after which he closes early and walks next door to the Mystic Feather.

That night Mark places two carved figurines on the headboard of his bed, side by side, male and female, two fat, naked, beautiful bone soldiers ready and willing to engage in procreative battle.

He and Edie smoke half a joint and make spaghetti with meatballs and then go to the bedroom where Mark makes loves to his non-ovulating wife as if he were a single, small, crescent moon-shaped tear clinging to a cheek facing a sun about to rise. Tomorrow is Sunday, the seventh day, the day when Mark, like God, sleeps in. He holds Edie tightly and rolls a small tendril of her dark hair so it curls and rests, just so, on her cheek under her closed eye.



How You Got Your Name

At night, we watched old movies listening for names to name our child. Later at night, we discussed color; how it ruined movies with promises, and we wondered why it didn't ruin children. Maybe it did.

So that is the story of how you got your name. It has everything a story needs, including conflict. We didn't have any money; meaning, we didn't have enough money.

The old movies kept arriving, and the same people kept appearing in them with new names, and problems that were new, and new almost kissing. The kissing in movies has never been right.

Today, of course, a movie can begin with ridiculous kissing under a sky that is several kinds of blue. But that is not where your name comes from.

Summer:

I am capable of lying—
there is no open space
that your mother didn't tell you about
no swollen finger worth crying over
no bargain to be had in the basement—

we have wood rot, I know, the neighbor
is doing something about his, the salt water,
the long summer, the wind. I can deal with termites,
shit I've already dealt with them.

You think when you buy a home... Yes, the neighbor is friendly
enough to lend you a blue pill here, a white one there,
he is a nice man. That is what nice men do. He is nice.
We agree, I don't know who will cut the lawn,
things of this nature, they take time.
They don't. They do.

Is there a date, it's nearly summer. Fall comes
soon. I agree. It comes soon but
the summer is what kills us,
the heat, the wind, the salt,
it's the summer we shouldn't
keep trying for.

Watching as the hand opens

Maybe, as with most
orchard visits,
        it was fall.

Probably my step brothers
mulled over the rotting apples
        lying in the arched kingdom

        of green
        grass,

        toeing the hyena
        flesh spots,

        slowly noticing
        each one –

        split
        open.

There were so many
        orchards near us;
        going to an orchard

would have been
something we would
        have done.

WHY THE INLAND PEOPLE CALL SOME KINDS OF WATER KILL

AFTER HEATHER MCHUGH

This is the beauty of it.

There is nothing in the drawing room
to suggest my dreams unhinging
tiny red doors
to allow the house to breathe.

Not moths scraping oars across the screen.

Not barred owls demanding, *who cooks for you.*

Alone,
I find that cold spring's copper spigot.
I drink two palms of water.

For what it's worth, what people call *kill*
is where I was
looking for *was*,

one hole to lower myself into.

FROM THE BOOK OF BOOKS

(chapter one : exegesis)

The forty-seventh word in the Book of Books is red, referring to a light-slant, the room in which through dust the day is falling. In turn, because the speaker isn't right, we, the audience, imagine being fucked with. I for one am empty of the ability to shine. Then, the walls collapse. A door of glass slides back, revealing girls. The light engages them in places inappropriate for children under seven. It was like the movies, like a stranger with his hands inside his pockets repeating beneath his breath the names of horses, like acid at a gun show. I swear to you, their jaws went slack in awe, and so did mine. Audience, surrender. Is it important, the men in the background balding, having stitched, at some point prior to the first word, the letter "I" in silver thread across their foreheads. It would be wise, I think, to consider before continuing, the history of salt, Mesopotamia, the tallest man on earth, circa 1956. Eventually the girls all turn to pillars. Eventually the sky. What strikes me when I read aloud at night is night. The way the stars look underwater if I extend the book, at arm's length, and squint my eyes exactly thin, the words go dark around me, turning and turning over, widening the sea.

MORTIFICE

there is a pin-tucked sleeve. it is a void.
the void is representative of the future tense.
there is a divergence which is a sweetheart neckline.
there is a power. the best we can hope for
is a body.

. . . the best we can hope for : now : dignity :: ceramic : cemetery : doll.

I have learned that the world
is designed for living in.

it follows:

every action is a behavior,

a birdcage, inside of which
one is always younger.

ribbon-wrapped bones collect white peals of laughter.

this is a symptom of the void which is the sleeve of the world.
everyone knows it knows what is inside of it and I am living in
it licking marrow from the walls.

o, it is so glamorous!

to be a wreck of a body unbound.

I sew buttons to my wrists,

o, beautiful/edge

: a jam drop in cream : nothing : :

KAVITA

Kavita pedaled toward her aunt's house. Her legs ached from dance class, the only high school class she enjoyed. The sky was gnarled up. The woods beside the road were thick with young pine trees, but she could also smell ocean marsh. She stopped pedaling, removed her hands from the handlebars, let the weight of her backpack, the weight of her body, gravity and entropy, carry her forward. A body in motion. An equal and opposite force. Her feet dangled. She had a strong, dancer's body, thick at the hips and thighs, forceful. She was always aware of her center, just below the navel. She let go of the center. The thin bicycle tire jagged on dirt beside the road. She landed heavily on her side, her leg scraping across the ground, in tall dry grass, the trunks of pine trees sideways, as if growing out of a dim green wall.

A man came to her as she lay still. The gnarled sky unfurled, dropping hard black drops of rain. Her aunt would wonder where she was, would send police officers out to look for her. They would sweep the roadside with searchlights calling her name. Kavita. The man was a light-skinned black man wearing thick, black-framed glasses and a black suit. His white shirt glowed. Everything about him was immaculate. The man reached out to touch her leg, gripped her thigh in his palm. Her leg was muscular, tight, his grip strong.

"Come on, now, Kavita," he urged. "Get up."

The rain intensified, lifting the smell of swamps and sulfur from the earth. Hell. Her father was in Hell. The man regarded her with curiosity, distrust, disappointment, it was hard to tell which. She would stay on the ground forever. She would

let the rough grass grow over her. Her heart would sink into the black mud and beat there. She breathed because she did not know how to stop breathing. The man cradled her head against his chest, her wet hair dirtying his white shirt.

"Come on, now," the man said, his voice her father's calm deep voice. "It's okay."

Two lights from the road rippled across the grass. Gnats rose from the ground. She felt them biting her shoulders her face her legs and the depression where her neck met her chest. The car did not stop. Kavita blinked. There was no man, no man's footprints. She lifted herself, then the bicycle. She walked down the road, the rim of the front tire warped now, describing a wayward rhythm.

• • •

"What happened to your leg?"

Her aunt was divorced. Her aunt's two children played in the scurfy grass behind the ranch house. The rain had ended. Kavita watched them through the window, wondered what game they were playing. The boy whipped a long thin branch through wet grass. The girl crouched, watching him. There was an intensity to their game, a seriousness.

"Nothing."

"Nothing, Kavita? Look at it. It looks like raw meat. You should wash it out."

"I will."

Her aunt had left Trinidad three years before her parents had. She had married a white man, an American. Her children were U.S. citizens. Outside, both children were now crouched before something Kavita could not see. A dead animal, she assumed. A brown and gray unidentifiable body.

She washed her leg in the white tub, rubbing off particles of dirt, road, and pebbles. The water ran pink down the ringed drain. The falling pebbles made small sounds like

insects chewing. This was real: The blood, her leg, the pain. Her body would heal itself. The water ran cold, then warm, then hot. Steam clouded the mirror. When she looked inside, her reflection ghosted. A man stood behind her wearing a black suit, a white shirt. She watched the rise and fall of her chest. He would grab her neck with both of his hands. Her neck was strong. It would not be easy for him. With her fingertip, she traced her outline in the mirror, her broad shoulders, her square head, her snaking hair, her waist. This is me. Kavita. You cannot kill me.

• • •

Then:

Her life had been held up by a pillow of air. She moved through that life effortlessly. She knew that she was lucky, but not that she was privileged. Dance lessons, sleepovers, movies, her large home in Ridgewood. Her room, her television, her computer.

She sat down to dinner with her mother and father, laughing, explaining her life to them, showing them almost all of it. Petty trouble with friends, her first kiss. Her father was often tired, but he smiled as he listened.

None of this was real.

• • •

To Kavita, dancing was joy, but not in an easy or simple way. Joy was possible in the world, but it had to be earned. Her body was the source of joy. Her legs were strong, her sense of rhythm very good, her weight centered. She felt movement in her muscles even without music. The dance teacher at the high school, Beth, was young, white, petite, her light blue eyes rimmed with thick black mascara. She was not always capable of controlling the class. On the dance team, power was contested. Kavita tried to stay in the background but was too good to remain invisible.

"Kavita, that's beautiful," Beth said. "Perfect."

Dancing was hard work, yes, but every move was perfectable. Eventually any move could be repeated with precision.

Dancing was also grueling. It was sweat and exhaustion.

Sometimes joy was not welcome. How can you feel this, now? She hid everything from her classmates. She smiled and laughed a lot. They were all strangers. She just needed to get through this year. Then: college. New life. Forgetting. People liked her. Teachers liked her, most of the other girls on the dance team liked her, boys liked her. It was not Ridgewood.

After school she did her homework at the kitchen table, or, if her aunt was not home from the hospital where she worked yet, played with the children. The boy was hard on the girl, pushing her down, smearing her face with dirt, but the girl was tough. Kavita danced with them in the back yard, gave them twirling ribbons on sticks. They ran through the grass laughing. Afterwards she would check them for ticks, carefully picking the insects out where they had rooted into the skin, sure to remove legs and teeth.

The man appeared only when she was alone, so Kavita tried to never be alone. He was always behind her, wearing a jackal's smile. He sat beside her bed at night, touching her forehead.

"Come on, now, Kavita. It's not so bad."

When she slept, she often had nightmares, but they disappeared as soon as she woke. The man's white shirt glowed in the dark room.

• • •

"Kavita? What kind of name is that?"

"It's Trini. I'm Trini."

"You don't look Trini."

"That's what people tell me all the time, but I am." She smiled, her white teeth even after years of braces. Full lips. Be beautiful.

Tim leaned toward her. His skin was the color of hot chocolate, his cheeks angular. He wore his hair short but it seemed to grow quickly—he was always in need of a shape up. His arms were thin and smooth. Trouble, people said. What did people know?

"Man, I think it's just beautiful, though. Kavita." He tasted the name.

"Really? Thanks."

"Beautiful name, beautiful name." They were supposed to be translating Shakespeare into modern English. A sonnet. My lover's eyes are nothing like the sun. Wasn't that English already? She moved her fingers along the edge of the paper, watching her wrist. Strong forearm, thin wrist, smooth dark skin. Do you see my hand? Do you see me?

"I haven't seen you anywhere around. Parties. Don't you go to parties, girl? Don't you like parties?"

"Sometimes."

"Sometimes? You don't like to have a good time? I can tell you like to have a good time. Look at that smile. I'm right, right?"

She shrugged, smiled. Games. Coded dances.

"I'll pick you up nine o'clock, Friday."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay." She nodded, smiled, turned away from him.

• • •

Then:

In many ways she was old enough to be a woman but was a child still. Her father had yelled before. He had thrown glasses across the room, sudden explosions. Shards. He had

complained about his economics students at the university, about how cold Americans were. He had brooded. It was what fathers did.

Every day she walked home from the high school, a few blocks, down safe, tree-lined streets, with friends. They laughed, made plans for the weekend. Every day she walked into her house, hugged her mother, drank a glass of orange juice.

She noticed blood on the tile floor. Her mind struggled to fit the blood into her schema of home. Someone had gotten hurt. Were they alright? Her mother's body was draped across the kitchen counter, a gash in her center, blood matting her black hair. Her father's body was slumped against the French doors, blood and brains spattered across the glass. None of this was real. All of this was real. She stood at the entrance to the kitchen, her backpack in her hand. She had Algebra homework. Algebra was difficult for her. She was hoping that her father would help her understand. The handgun her father had shown her once—"for protection," he had said—had fallen onto the tile floor, away from his clutched hand. His face was gone.

She answered the questions asked of her. She rode in the back of her aunt's car. She was alive. I am still alive, she wanted to tell them. Her father had worn black suits, pristine white shirts.

• • •

Kavita dressed in a tight black t-shirt which stretched across her chest, a bright yellow overshirt, a skirt, gladiator sandals. She didn't know how to dress. Her aunt looked at her.

"Going out tonight, Kavita?"

"Yes."

"Good for you."

Her aunt had taken her own grief and tucked it inside of her. A sachet. Her aunt was kind but she would not allow her soul dominion over her body. All life was risk. Didn't she see that?

• • •

The party was loud and crowded, in a large house near a small pond. Tim held her hand, handed her a drink.

"I don't drink," she told him.

"What do you mean you don't drink?" He smiled but was not happy.

"I don't drink."

"What do you do then? Do you smoke?"

"No. I dance."

The music was loud, the bodies pressed close against each other. In Ridgewood she had gone to parties, danced with her girlfriends, flirted with boys, laughed. Here the music was loud, everyone drank, couples were already in corners kissing.

"Can we go outside?"

"Girl, I need to get a drink."

Kavita walked out of the house. The pond had once been a cranberry bog, and just below the surface she could see overgrown cranberry bushes with red branches like hair.

• • •

She walked down long empty dark roads, pine trees on either side of her. The wind picked up, blowing her yellow shirt in different directions, a flag flapping. She was iron and wood. When the man in the black suit and white shirt made his appearance this time, she decided, she was going to talk to him. She was going to tell him that she was done with him. She didn't want to see him ever again. He would not leave her—she knew he wouldn't—but she could be done with him.

News of You

I learn to read you in the oily
silence of the lemons, a bowl
painted with chrysanthemum; in the
autumnal, the girl in a torn coat
sitting at the park bench staring at
her feet, the sexual cries of the
pigeons in the bean tree in my yard—
their flapping out at dawn, a flurry
of white like exposed thighs. Not
to listen for news of you as though
you had become a man in a book,
forever on page 243—entering a
room, softly closing a door. You
lift suitcases, pay the check,
an anonymous exchange
of quarters for coffee, a credit card
for a tank of gas. The tightness
eases but only in increments. So long
I spent snaring the trap—delicate
instrument of hair and wing, brightness
of blue bead and razor. Now if you

could only see me disassembling
it—how I struggle to love the
backwards glance, you changed into
mere figure—an illustration in my book
of illuminations: The boy with the falcon,
holding out his thin wrists.

What the Doctor Said

Imagine a countdown clock, ten, nine
eight, so on, but it's, say, four digits long.

It started at four nines, nine-nine-nine-eight
then down. In a long while, you get to four eights,

the same interval till four sevens. They glow
like hooks on the digital readout. The countdown

clock, you know, by its nature, will stop.
And then: an explosion, or a light somewhere turns on

or off, or the piercing drone of an alarm.
Maybe a rocket launches. Who knows—we know

only the countdown stops. That's your body now,
that's this disease. Here's the thing:

imagine the digits are foreign to you. In time,
you get the sequencing, sort of, know when it will click

to four identical digits, lights arranged all alike.
So when it says six-six-six-seven, the next

could be the last or it could keep going.
No matter what I tell you now

you'll never look away.

Bomb

This is a novel about the bomb plot
narrowly averted. Don't fret; it's short.
Screenplay? you say,
but how portray the protagonist's conscience,
the second thoughts? Flashback to his mother
and her labor, the childhood taunts
for his stammer or his stature or
his second-hand shoes. Pan to his little girl
in the playground.
That's enough.
This is the script about the bomb
defused—not the fire, not the flames, blue
and brighter, not the metal molten,
not the screams, the shards, the lightning.
You can almost smell
burnt hair, blood's tang, flesh roasting.
But this is not about the pyre. In this
one, your protagonist sleeps in.
The six-year old,
brow furrowed, concentrates on jacks,
her terrier licks his privates beside her.
She hums a tune she just made up.
Tonight her papa will cook their supper.
Her mama touches her brush tip to her lip,
then to her paints.

Worst Case

Do all you can to appear larger. Cover
the alligator's eyes. Running may

cause the mountain lion to pay more
attention. Do not submerge; the bees

are liable to be waiting when you surface.
Pythons will strike rather than consume

a full-grown human. Immobilize the bitten area;
keep it lower than the heart. Do not attempt

to suck out venom. Use anything you have
to hit a shark in the eyes. Avoid shiny jewelry.

Do not enter the water if menstruating.
It does not pay to surprise a bear. Do not

get out for a quick photo. Eliminate odors
from camp, self, or vehicle. An attack

often ends when the person stops fighting.
If a bull charges, throw your shirt or hat,

whatever its color. If you encounter a stampede,
try to determine where it is headed.

Soleil Levant: Zabriskie Point

The landscape like a skein unwinding,
or a litter of piglets pushing at pink teats
—this hyperbole not equal to the actual
grandeur—meanwhile each moment,
a transient sun is making it new.

You know Monet was right: nothing
exists but that the light engenders it;
nothing stays solid as the light liquefies.
Or put it this way: moment is movement;
not sunrise, but sun rising.

You dart about, camera and eye responding
to it all, a compass needle obeying
the pull of iron. But even what you think
is your will is a current trumping
the self, a tropism bending you.

SIXTEENTH STREET

I lived in the house with three others, a painter, a receptionist and a teacher of dance.

Ian, the teacher of dance, never unpacked his boxes. He and his lover would stop by for clothes, trailing words, and again you would hear the one-two of car doors and the car itself as it rose toward the wide open mouth of Sixteenth Street.

Gunnar, the painter, worked half-time at a shelter and slept on a cot in his room, which was more an atelier. He kept that door closed, but I'd glimpsed the spare work of his hand: long paintings of figures, black on white, a fullness of limb and breast and ass in the freedom of after-sex.

Mina, the last of my housemates, had no car, in fact didn't drive. She walked straight into the eye of the sun to catch the bus to work; I'd squint, maybe wave, then drive the other way, through the park. I worked in a diner.

One guy, a chef, told stories about race tracks and horses, a world he'd left behind long ago when he moved to the city.

I thought about telling one of these stories to Mina, but the stories weren't mine.

I said, If I close my eyes I can still feel my arm with the spatula.

The television bent its light in silence. She knew to laugh.

She said, I was on my way back here yesterday. There were no seats. I had hold of the strap and was rocking slightly, like going to sleep. I thought, I could take this bus right up Sixteenth Street. I could keep going. All the way. And get off at the end and walk back to my parents' house. Be sleeping again in my bed.

I laughed—but at what?

The parents Mina had mentioned would sometimes

appear with warehouse purchases: crates of mandarin oranges, tubs of fresh spinach, bricks of white cheese, and huge bags of rice, awkwardly crimped in the hook of an arm like a little dead body.

Mina would thank them, but she never ate much.

She kept her room neat. One time she had me in there, and I thought, from beneath the words I was saying and hearing, that we might relent in some way, just give what our bodies could give in the shift of the light.

Did she have the same notion?

We sat at the foot of her bed. She flipped the gold clasps of a velvet-lined case she'd taken from underneath, and I said, A trumpet.

She shook her head. Flugelhorn.

She lifted it out and held it there, in her hands, sort of dripping with shine. I sat in thick witness: the bends of its silvery pipes; the lavish spread of its bell.

Play it, I said without clearing my throat.

But again she shook her head.

I rued all the little silences, which held us like rests in a score.

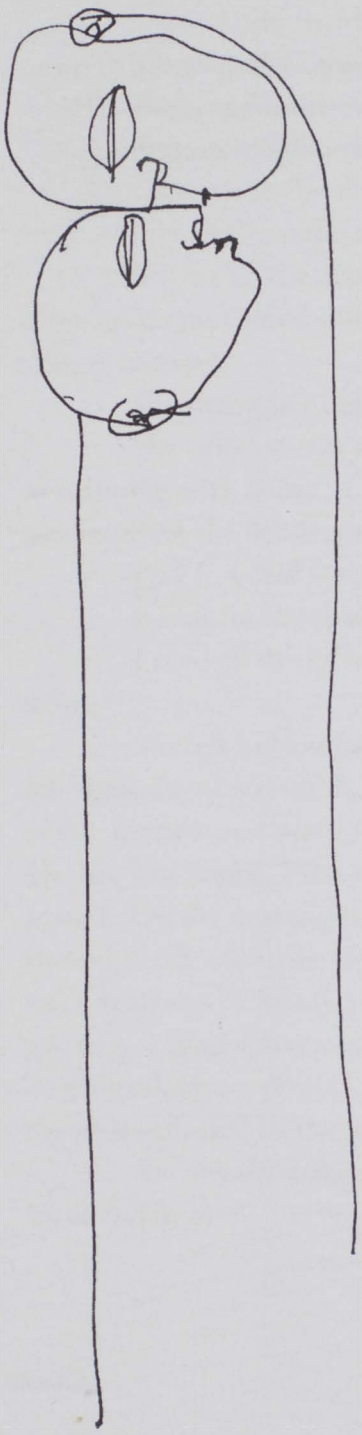
She left in November. By then the weather had turned. For three days I was off the schedule and didn't go out; rain beat at the window and made of the glass a crabbed placard of blur. On the first night, I downloaded music, formed a playlist for myself. On the next night, I turned on the TV but immediately turned it off. On the third night I was starving and made a small feast out of Mina's abandoned store—the rice, the lentils, all of it. I used spices, weird herbs in unmarked jars I'd found in the back of a cupboard. I birthed a rich steam, which floated the stairwell, snaked the transom above Gunnar's door.

He stood blinking, not really processing yet. What is it? he finally said.

Mouth full, I just gestured. It was rice. It was lentils. It was some spinach that hadn't gone bad. Lots of fruit. Lots of toast, with a five-set of jellies and jams: marmalade, lemon curd, apricot, seedless raspberry, apple butter.

Gunnar's eyes wouldn't work.

Sit down, I said to him, but I didn't stop eating to wait. I kept my mouth low. I ate hard, and without any rush. There was more of the rice, more of the fruit, more of everything.



In the Alley with the Girl Who Played Anybodys, Who is Now A Doctor in Duluth

It was nearly noon on a gray August Saturday, the audience already strolling in for the show, and two teenagers lingered by the loading dock, the big bay doors closed. They'd propped open a side door, its black paint chipped, with a brick, a weight for some backdrop or something the light crew used. They were in costume. Anyone looking down the angled alley would have seen two boys: a taller, dark haired one in black pants and a red shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, a purple bandana tied around one wrist, and another boy in jeans and a dark t-shirt, a faded olive jacket and a baseball cap. The tall boy's hair fell over his forehead, the sides slicked back with grease. The other boy was a little, well, rounder, since the second boy wasn't a boy, but a pretty girl hiding her figure, her brown hair tucked up and under the cap. Her lips were red, with maybe a little out-of-character lipstick, and her blue eyes glinted, even in the shadows. Two boys kissing, one holding onto his cap, careful to keep it from falling into the dirty puddles. Their tennies, battered era-appropriate Converse, no garish '80's running shoes, no hot pink or neon green, were wet and would leave tracks on the way back to their respective dressing rooms. The tall boy had a girlfriend, also an actress, but not in this show, and Anybodys' best friend, too, so the kiss was clandestine and stupid and nothing meant for long. If the teenagers could have looked into the near future—an onstage broken nose for him, a rum-drunk night for her—they might have regretted the kiss, the fallout, worse than a make-believe gang fight—but if they could look down that alley and see a further future, how long

would they have held on: the grind of college and next boyfriends and next girlfriends and more tequila than is wise and unexpected babies and decisions to leave theater and get real jobs or go to med school, to leave the alleys before showtimes to other people, less sane people, people who don't have mortgages and who don't have titles either, but still get to pretend to be other people. And then you're in the audience watching them, maybe they sing a song you once knew, kick high in the air you once kicked, and land on both poorly-soled shoes—maybe they would have let that kiss last a little longer because who really cares if it's two boys, or a Shark and a wanna-be Jet, or a boy with a girlfriend and a girl who doesn't really love the boy as much as he'd want her to, maybe it could last a moment longer, for her blue eyes to flash again and the fakegrime smudging her smooth cheeks to hide a blush and her scent, not New York ruffian but Wisconsin girl healthy, to sneak from under the hairspray and asphalt, and maybe that kiss could last a little longer, no Rodolfo and Mimi moment, no Romeo and Juliet pact, but a small defense against the future pressing on the horizon, all that heartbreak and homework and other people we truly love, the ones who waited in the wings, the right ones, while this was all, we told ourselves, just a moment, just pretend.

no. 20

OFFSTAGE—THE KILLING OF RUTH COLLINS BY RUSSELL LEE

there are crimes and there are crimes of passion. if someone found him
right afterwards, he'd probably say

it was neither, but a necessity born out of shame.

today, he'd tell you otherwise, and he tries to scrape it from his past
like bark from a tree, but it's tied to his ribcage and only tightens
when he tries to free it.

the night it went down, he entered though the back

put a burlap bag over his head and stood over the bed—once theirs—and used a pillow
to muffle the shots.

instead of shooting, he used the pillow to snuff her out.

took three hours of sitting inside his car, three blocks down, across the ball park,
loading and unloading shells into the chamber of his pistol. walking through
how it would go.

when it was over, he remembered

how she'd lay herself on their living room floor, fold her arms across
her chest and say,

"this is what i'd look like in a casket..."

and

"am i still pretty when i'm dead?"

people fall in love in the key of c and out of it with dissonance,

climbing its way into a scale.

that night, he made her bed, cleaned the house, and carried her from the house to his car,
and left her body a mile from the quarry in the place kids call the ghost woods.

he tells bartenders about his dreams, the ones starting afterwards, about kasey
always clicking the chamber of his pistol and saying,

"what i do and what i should are like brothers."

• • •

her name was number 20 on the list, today the sheriff's found parts of her body
under a stump. one of the deputies says, "who's that?"
the sheriff straightens up and pulls the list from his shirt pocket. he unfolds it and reads
her name and though he's never read it before.

sometimes, songs begin, almost like this:

Russell Lee's Dream Sequence

it's not a helicopter scaling its way down the side of the building
this begins from train windows
watching willows lit by moon ricochet in the thick pitch—

someone says, "night hums when the moon's out," and sometimes
if it's just right
you can see faces ghosted up in burlap, ready for robberies

they'll show at the edge of tracks, moving towards the wreck
barrels slitting through
the damp mist of the hillside. now, from train windows i see kasey.

kasey and her black hood floating towards me, like a stalled truck
through an intersection
as if the moon is guiding her. the train, even slower, and when i touch

my face, there's blood. only it's gray and thin as water.
when the door swings up
kasey's there, smirking like a crowbar lodged underneath a deadbolt

someone says, "this cadence will be danced."

she's holding my shoulders, when the train stops at the bluff, its cliffs
tumbling down
into where the pacific had laid itself. it's not salt i taste in the air

but skin, worse yet, the skin of my wife.

wolves howling sound like footsteps
in grass or leaves plucking themselves
from branches as if there's nothing else to do.

kasey says, "down there's where boy get covered
in dirt, boys become men overnight, they learn to earn
their keep for comebacks, second chances,
and the opening and closing of gates.

Helen Keller Does Vaudeville, 1920

FOR SHIRA

Anne Sullivan did the talking, her finger
Tapping Helen's palm with a kind of Morse code.
Full grown, she could have been a stranger
With a headset on the other side
Of the world. But Anne stood by her, the crowd
That had come to jeer if unconvinced,
Well in hand. Their dim faces demanded
Spectacle a little less, impressed
Upon her only later when Anne could spell
It out: the curtain's rise as in surrender
To astonished hush, then an earful
Of laughter with each dumb one liner
Helen mouthed and Anne translated. A thousand
People caught on as when Anne gave her water
As a word and let her mind drink. Reprised
The scene quenched a need: corny theater
Perhaps, but it still healed blind ignorance
By suggestion, like a hypnotist's shibboleth.
To take action was the act, the humbling chance.
Psychic hermaphrodites, fire eating midgets—
The audience had seen all, and not enough,
Mesmerized with what Anne drummed into her, this
Like every day the performance of
Her life, touch as common sense and witness.

Sham Country

Some feathered quiver. Most sleep.
Great spools of cable, a lowing unsourced.

At times the tension towers evoke "marvelous horror,"
their swath a blown-up furrow, an agriculture.
Most sleep. Most chairs overturned in nominal light.

One dream features the known faceless in a fluorescent
basement with proliferating corners. Rains have beat
the mud up onto the ground-level windows, fixation.

Everything processional. Moths corner the motel
ice machine, the breezeway suffers factory air.

The only machines forever rest.
Bloated low-flying craft respond to one blink
repeated to whole minds of houses. Enter the toad
in unfortunate water

Chelydra serpentina

Then along the side of the road there's this
turtle, and it's just sitting there, head
half out of its shell, not moving, so you think
maybe it's dead—except that its stillness
is taut with potential.
Seemingly oblivious
to the leaves and sticks plastered
to its carapace, it waits for some minute
diurnal click to signal *now* inside
its ancient brain, to wake the lumbering
gait with which it will retrace
its own journey from the egg, down
the mossy hill to the green, skulking pond.

Tina Modotti "Roses" (1925)

The color receptors have been switched off
They are either roses or ash

If they are flowers
they have become blank and frightening

They are pressed too closely
There exists more vegetation than the frame
of the eye may contain

They are packt into a singularity
That is where the blackness of rose is heading

Their lack of odor overwhelms–
I expect to be assaulted by rank,

Crowded gas
And the ghost-mist of pollen

They are certainly threatening me,
I've determined
Unless they are asking for my help

Unless they were trying to claw their way out
In which case they are certainly ash

Stickers

We are ready. I lift the heavy stock gate out of its rocky bed and swing it open so that Gerald can make the wide turn onto the rutted dirt road that leads to the highway. As if on cue, Ruth's dog Scout heads off north from his post on her front porch, ready to periodically trot the fence line until we return. Our journey will take us northeast, from Cortez across the high desert of southwestern Colorado and into the San Juan mountains, through the ever-smaller towns of Dolores and Stoner, up the Dolores River Valley towards Rico. Eventually we will leave the highway and drive dirt roads high into the backcountry on Taylor Mesa.

Gerald's stepmother Ruth is in the passenger seat of this rental jeep we picked up when Gerald and I flew into Albuquerque five days ago. I am in the back , alone but acutely aware of the black box on the seat next to me. Made of pebbled plastic and labeled with his name and the date of his cremation, the box holds the remains of Bill Shearer, Gerald's dad.

Today, on Bill's last trip up Taylor Mesa, we will walk with him through meadows grown knee-high in wildflowers to the crystalline stream where he has caught a lifetime of cutthroat trout. To the place he loved best.

It's not yet eight o'clock, but I have already been to the grocery store where I bought graham crackers—Bill's favorite—some nectarines, and a bag of Bing cherries that set me back more than the price of a meal. We didn't plan a picnic, but Ruth was prepared too, with hardboiled eggs and some apples ready in a paper bag on her kitchen counter. In this country, a day trip requires food and water. We will pass

not one single fast food place and only a couple of gas stations that sell candy bars, cigarettes, and the kind of coffee that sits in the glass pot until you can stand a spoon in it.

For Gerald, this trip to Colorado is one more homecoming in a forty-year pattern of leaving and returning. His latest departure—"the very last one and the clock is ticking on it," he often reminds me—closed the distance in the long-distance relationship we began when I, too, lived in this Four Corners region during a leave from my Indiana University teaching position.

Soon, we hope to return for good, to settle in a spot that's safe for the dogs to run, big enough to pasture a couple of horses, and favorable for an extensive garden. We want an outdoor life: spring camping in the Utah desert, summer and fall pack trips into the Colorado back country. Our retirement dreams focus on setting up a big sheepherder's tent in some remote location for a month at a time.

For me, such a life will be an end point, resolution to a longing I have known since childhood. For Gerald, however, that future is more complicated, for he must attempt to reconcile his desire for the self sufficient life he experienced as a child and still longs for with the changes that time has wrought in him and in this place he still calls home.

The Shearers belong to a group that writer Wallace Stegner calls stickers, people who came to the American West, met the tough challenges of a developing frontier, and stayed. When Isaac and Jacob Shearer arrived in New York from Ireland, they were immediately conscripted into the Union Army. When the war over, they made their way west through Kansas into Colorado and up over Slumgullion Pass to begin a life as hard rock gold miners. They persevered: marrying, raising children, and thus creating a first generation of Shearer stickers. Tax records list the notable possessions of their early life there, a cow and a watch.

As we drive north toward Taylor Mesa, we are surrounded by a rocky, empty landscape, a reminder that to be a sticker in this country, you had to be determined and adaptable. The weather was fierce, the work hard, physical, and often lonely, with monetary reward reliably sparse. But the Shearers stuck it out. Like his ancestors, Bill Shearer pieced together a broad range of proficiencies—miner, cowboy, railroad man, carpenter, trapper, mechanic—to see him through. Rather than a career, he built a way of life.

It's been a long time since Bill last compensated for all his hard work by going up on Taylor Mesa to his favorite fishing spot. Across the years, he and Gerald spent some of the best days and nights of their lives camping and fishing Taylor Creek. Though I have never been there, I have heard the stories. Gerald likes to recount the August afternoon when he stayed too long on the mesa. Lonely summer dusk set in, and with it, wolves appeared to follow him and his string of fish nearly a mile before they prevailed. Though he was armed, he gave up his entire catch, willingly he says, given the choices available. It's a trademark Shearer story, meant to demonstrate the kinds of places they like to go, the inherent risks in their pleasure, and the complex covenants developed between a man and his environment. A sticker story.

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Wind and the roar of the jeep's engine require me to lean up out of my seat, straining to hear the conversation as Gerald and Ruth reminisce. They have an unusual relationship: for twenty years of his life, Ruth was Gerald's aunt, mother to his five cousins and married to Bill's brother Nathan. Then both Ruth's and Bill's marriages broke up, and they came together to consolidate ten Shearer offspring into a single unit.

This double connection of family relationships, the complex network of relatives, is typical of stickers. The work

and the location may have been hard and lonely, but family provided support. We pass by a little draw and sure enough, Ruth remarks on a group of kids, maybe ten to fourteen years old, walking there. Cottonwood fluff catches in the black braids of a tall girl as she smiles and waves. Ruth identifies them. "Those must be your Aunt Myrt's grandkids," she tells Gerald.

"Did Fred have any?" he asks, referring to Myrt's second husband.

"Yes. I remember one day, one of those boys was out working with the men in the west field and decided he just didn't want to work anymore. They said he could quit if he could find his way home, so he took off. I was inside the house, and I could hear him bawling and yelling. Silly kid thought he was lost. But he had family all around him."

We fall silent, everyone thinking of all that family and of days gone by. People gone by, too—Grandma Greta, Uncle John, and, of course, Bill.

Ruth breaks the silence. "I guess I'm not normal," she tells Gerald. "I loved your dad very much. We had a good life together. But I just can't get any talk out of that box. Mary Ann and other women I know who've already gone through this, they set the boxes by their beds, they say. And they talk with them. But not me: to me that box is just a box. My husband is not in there."

I understand. Who could imagine Bill Shearer in a box? He is outside tinkering with an old pickup while sneaking a forbidden cigarette. Or splitting wood for the stove. Or building a table. Or working in his flower garden—gorgeous morning glories and roses—or picking raspberries for jam making. Reading Louis L'Amour in his chair next to the stove. Or sitting at the kitchen table, his blue eyes bright with mischief as he dishes up outrageously large helpings of ice cream for everybody to eat while we examine the trove of family photographs featuring cowboys, dogs, horses, and

solemn people in silent-movie clothing lined up before a rough-hewn house and a sky full of mountains.

"Do you remember hearing about Arnold?" Ruth asks Gerald. He does not. "Well, Arnold was a trapper. He always smelled of skunk." She pauses for a moment. "That sure taught me never to look for love in a magazine," she says, her short grey curls bobbing as she nods for emphasis.

"Grandma Greta was so lonely, you know, after Grandpa Wes died," Ruth says. "But then after she and Arnold met up through that magazine ad, she found out he had been under suspicion of killing his wife. He always wanted to take Grandma out into the woods, camping. She figured maybe he had the same thing in mind for her, so she wouldn't go. And then one day Arnold disappeared. Conveniently. I think your dad and Uncle John were out of town that day. On family business." She turns to me with a meaningful look, making sure I catch her point. I do.

"She lived a hard life. Sure never had much of anything," says Gerald.

"Well now, her trailer house was paid for."

• • •

It's July now; Bill died in May. We missed the memorial service Gerald's sister Yvonne put together, but Bill would have understood. Instead of attending the service for his favorite brother John several years ago, Bill spent the day in the high country, the traditional family refuge, where solitude and solace combine. Our destination today.

With the San Juan mountains still only blue shapes against the brighter blue sky, we turn towards them, north, up the Dolores River Valley. This country still carries the Spanish nomenclature of the early European explorers. They named this river El Rio de Nuestra Senora de las Dolores, The River of Our Lady of Sorrows. I look at Ruth and wonder if she thinks of

herself that way. If she does, she's keeping it to herself. At her request, we break out the graham crackers, bottles of water, and cherries. They are a deep rich red, a worthy extravagance.

As I roll down the window to toss out a cherry seed, we pass a cluster of buildings. "Your dad and I used to come up here every week to listen to country music, maybe three, four years ago. They had a barbeque dinner," says Ruth. "That was one our favorite treats." Then she looks at Gerald. "You used to like country music, but I guess you went another direction, switched to something else."

Actually, Bill's and Ruth's children, just seven of ten left now, quite literally took many directions—to Texas, Alaska, California, Oklahoma—until only two still live in Colorado. They left for opportunity, for adventure, and for solitude, the same siren songs that drew their forbears to this country. Gerald is among them. Across the years, he has been a field mechanic in Utah, driven a truck in Alaska when the pipeline was under construction, and owned and operated a six-bay mechanics shop for truck and trailer repair in Texas. In his middle age, worn down by "mechanic-ing," he returned to Colorado in an attempt to recreate the childhood he loved by buying a little ranch, raising livestock and a hay crop, keeping a milk cow, and putting up the output of an impressive garden.

In sticker style, he diversified by apprenticing as an electrician: economic life here still demands a broad range of talent to survive. In the end, however, tired of scraping by and willing to suspend life in his true home once again, he moved east and found success as a craftsman and designer in Indianapolis where he is nonetheless decidedly homesick. Not just for the country, but for the life he knew there. "I want to live like Dad," he says.

Asked to explain, he can. It always turns on a sense of self sufficiency and the nature of the place. He wants to be

self sufficient. In the mountain west. He wants that free life, hard but rich in adventure and in the solitude that's integral to a lifestyle and place that exists today primarily in his memory.

Gerald's dilemma, the problem of his generation of stickers, is to somehow square his fealty to his background with the limitations and the choices of the present. How does a self-defined working man retain his identity given the opportunity to labor less? Where on the plane of self-sufficiency does a modern sticker locate himself? And how does he keep the old covenants in a rapidly changing environment?

• • •

Bill's world, the life of his generation of stickers, was on display yesterday and the day before when Gerald and I cleaned out the semi-trailer north of the house where Bill had a little workshop. And where he had amassed enough projects to busy himself for another lifetime. Generations of electrical appliances stood three-deep on the shelves. "I guess he figured to fix them one of these days," Gerald says. "It's about the Depression. People who grew up then just can't throw things away. Especially when they have the know-how to fix them."

From the looks of it, Bill had the know-how to fix radios, fans, percolators, lawn mowers, record players and space heaters. And he had the parts to fix them with. Motors of all sizes. Electrical wiring. Fuses and old lightbulbs of every kind, from flashlights to headlights. And nails and screws and tacks and staples and hinges and bolts and washers. All in Folgers Coffee cans. Across two days, we have carried more than one hundred of those cans to the front of the trailer and dumped their contents into the five-gallon plastic oil buckets he also collected. We hauled them, along with all kinds of scrap metal, old batteries, and motors to Belt Salvage where we collected a check for $130 to take home to Ruth.

We have also made three trips to the dump, all with Bill's old pickup, loaned to us by a friend who bought it—at a steal—shortly before Bill's death. Gerald wants that truck. He's told Ruth to keep her ears open; if it's for sale, he'll buy it. Why? For one thing, it was made in America, Gerald tells me. "And, a man can fix a truck like that." Not only can he fix it, but he can expect it—a 1972 Chevy four-wheel drive—to still be working thirty-five years later. And, of course, it includes custom features: the saddle horn gearshift created by Bill's brother John, the pine gun rack, and the fold-down frame that secures a cowboy hat snug against the ceiling, all marking this truck as Bill Shearer's.

By the end of the second day, Gerald has arranged in the gravel driveway a row of metal contraptions that represent the evolving technology, and ethics, of trapping. He lines them up by size—big ones for coyote and bobcat down to small ones for muskrat. From the most basic jaw traps that intend only to hold, usually a leg, to the newer and more "humane" kill traps. They crush the whole body. "These will sell," he says. "The old-timers will want to hang them in their workshops or on their barn doors."

Bill's parents, Weston and Greta, raised five children in a sheepherder's tent on a desolate piece of land that's still empty, just off what is now Highway 160 near Stinkin' Springs Canyon, not far from the turnoff to Mesa Verde National Park. In the thirties, even while working as a miner and building railroad, Wes Shearer also had to hunt and trap in order to support his family. In the fifties, when Gerald was a kid and Bill was the caretaker for Henderson Ranch, a 2,500 acre spread owned by the Ute Mountain Utes, he, too, ran a trapline.

The family of seven lived in the ranch house while Bill maintained the place all year round, but the Utes paid him only for the months when the livestock—500 head of sheep, 300

cattle, and 80 horses—were pastured there. By late fall, the stock were moved to winter pasture in New Mexico, and then Bill trapped to help support his family.

During one afternoon of cleaning, I reach deep into a shelf, and there, propped against the metal wall, I touch something that feels like a very heavy net. My tugging rewards me with snow shoes, big ones. When I call to Gerald, he nods and stands them up in the narrow aisle. "I used to walk on the back of these, right behind Dad, holding on to him, lifting a foot every time he did, checking the traplines. When I was just six..."

He is silent for a moment. "We'll keep these," he says, and head down, carries them outside to lean them against the jeep. When an antique dealer comes the next day, she wants them; but they will go home with us to hang on the wall with Bill's lariat and irrigation shovel.

• • •

The road is all upward now, our progress slowed by a dump truck hauling a huge semi up this steep grade. We come around a bend and there in the midst of emerald green fields and sparkling water is a dead black cow in the irrigation ditch, all four legs straight up. I am shocked and, unaccountably, reach toward the box, but Ruth just remarks, "That's a big bunch of dollars lying there dead," before going right on with her own concerns.

"I love it up here in all these big trees," she says. "One of these days, I'm gonna come up here and live. Back up in the high country again."

No one responds. We know that Ruth's life in the high country is likely over; before winter comes again she will leave Colorado to live with her son in California. No more snowbound days or weeks warmed by the wood stove, baking bread, cooking whatever's been stored away for this very time, reading books, and working on a jigsaw puzzle.

That's another reality of sticker life: it's hard to grow old here. Stickers come from a long line of tough, resourceful people, but the time comes when they can't shovel the snow or bring in wood to fire the stove. There's no such thing as a company pension. And today, their kids are likely to be gone, not living just down the road with room for another double-wide on their acreage and ready hands to help.

Even stickers who have done a little better, running sixty or so head of cattle and growing their own hay for the winter feed, likely have their own financial troubles and can no longer afford to live up here. The beef industry has changed; small operators can barely exist. So reluctantly, more and more of them have to play their ace: real estate that is sky high in both geographical and financial terms. One by one these ranches are being sold off and divided up into estates for the rich, vacation homes for people from California and Texas that raise property taxes and bring utilities and roads into formerly remote places.

As development spreads up the mountain, sticker families know that there's no new place to conquer. The frontier is gone forever, and so sticking it today brings the challenges of living in town: fencing in your cattle dogs, adjusting to a homeowner's association. It happens fast. And they've seen it before.

When Gerald was born in Telluride in 1954, no ski lifts or timber frame mansions existed there. Bill walked across town in a New Year's Eve blizzard, bringing the doctor back to the row of company houses where the miners and their families lived. Fifteen years later, Joseph Zoline and his Telluride Ski Corporation launched the transformation that replaced miners with tourists and turned local people into waitstaff and maids struggling to find the affordable housing that mine owners once provided there.

Gerald and I try to be realists as we plan our future in the southwest. We have reluctantly changed our search terms for Colorado real estate. We know we can't afford our dream

of building a high country cabin nestled against a forested backdrop. That's where the millionaires live. We will settle for something at lower elevation, and contrary to sticker custom, we will not develop what undeveloped land remains. Instead, we will choose from what's available, probably a fixer-upper on a few acres of pasture. Unremarkable but practical, a place away from town, within close range for camping in both the desert and the high country.

In another twist of sticker fate, Gerald Shearer aspires to spend his high country time in some state-owned campsite in the same last-resort shelter that his grandparents raised their children in: the sheepherder's tent.

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We are looking for the turnoff. No name on a sign, just a trail number. Water tumbles down the hillside and under the highway. A stand of white daisies leans out over the stream, their faces spattered by spray. Aspen grow thick along the road, surrounded by something that looks like yellow snap dragons; neither Ruth nor I can name them. Within a few yards of our turning, we encounter a barricade: Road Closed. "No it's not," says Gerald. He shifts gears and we bypass it, climbing onward, the jeep listing and bouncing on the rough road.

"You know," Ruth says, "When we used to come fishing up here, Bill always wanted to camp, not just come for the day. He'd get up early to fish; I'd sleep in. Then he'd send the dog back to wake me up. When I saw that dog face looking into the tent, I'd get breakfast going. There'd always be fish to fry. And Bill had to have pancakes with his fish."

The ammo box full of treasures from our work in the trailer yesterday rattles in the back as we jounce forward on this washboard road. "Look at the size of those quakies," says Gerald, pointing at the aspen. "You have to be up really high to get trees that big."

I lean out the window. Far below, water flows in a deep gorge. And despite the giant dandelions that crowd the road, winter is not long gone up here: the road hasn't been cleared. Around the next switchback, we find an idled road crew, all watching as a big man in overalls bangs on the engine of a stalled grader with a wrench. A young man—flannel shirt, cowboy boots, and a curly beard—walks back to apologize. He and Gerald talk engines until black smoke pours from the machine, the driver moves it out of the way, and we pass them up.

A mile higher, we roll to a stop against the trunk of a downed aspen. Gerald steps out into snow as he moves some branches and tries to assess the situation. Ruth and I drink water but I wish for coffee. I wonder if we will have to walk from here and how Ruth will manage that, but Gerald returns, maneuvers around and over the debris, and we continue to climb.

Just as the road levels out, he slows the jeep and abruptly turns down a little incline, off the road and into a clearing. We have arrived. He silently takes the box from the back seat, carrying it in one hand while he offers Ruth the other. For now, however, she wades on her own through patches of Indian paintbrush and rosy asters, past banks of columbine crowded along a boulder: it's as if an entire wildflower book has been cut apart and scattered through the high green grass.

When the terrain becomes rough, Ruth takes Gerald's arm. We step over downed trees, stop to look at elk droppings, then cross a little stream of snow melt. He points off to his left, and there, edged by blue spruce, is Taylor Creek. We stand for a moment on a little knoll, watching the water leap and play in the sunshine, then Gerald clears his throat. "Dad sure could get to this creek in a hurry. And could he fish! Them little cutthroats!"

At creekside, Ruth finds a big rock to sit on; I'm on a fallen tree trunk. A red-shafted flicker crosses the creek. Chickadees flit everywhere and I can hear a mountain jay

overhead. Sun streams through the branches of spruce and pine that scent the cool air.

"Well, okay then," Gerald says. "I guess Dad and I will take a little walk down the creek." He looks unsure; we have nothing to offer him. Silent, he turns and crosses the stream, stepping from stone to stone, water spraying all around him. Snow lingers beneath the low branches of giant spruce. He does not look back at us but moves into the trees and disappears.

Ruth and I watch the birds. A squirrel, she calls it a tree-topper, chatters at us. We smile at him and that loosens the mood. "I was never sure Bill and I were really married," she says. "It was in a bad snowstorm and everybody was in a big hurry. It went so fast. We just looked at the judge and said, "I do.'"

"You were married. Two of the happiest-to-be-married people I've ever known. Bill always says he was in love with you from the time he was just a kid," I say, thinking of the photo of Bill Shearer, age 17, sturdy and rakish in tall laced boots, a gun over his shoulder, the photo that makes my own heart thump.

"That was the trouble. He would come around and tease me, and... I could tell. But I was too old for him. He was a kid." She looks downstream and rubs one worn finger across a patch of moss. "We were lucky. Lucky to have each other later, for all these years."

In our silence, the silence of the water and of the wind, time slows. The water rolls over the rocks, its spray glittering into rainbows suspended above the streambed, and the breeze fades to the waft of the azure dragonflies gliding among the unfurling fronds of emerald fern.

Beyond the creek a timeless figure materializes from the misty green distance. The brimmed hat, the broad shoulders, the hand curled over a gnarled spruce staff. Ruth straightens, fixed and alert. And for just a moment, they all converge, layered and transparent as mica within the silhouette: Grandpa Wes, Isaac, Gerald, Uncle John, Bill.

The breeze quickens, the spray dissipates, and gradually the outline is filled in. As Ruth and I watch, Gerald emerges. What we see in that moment, and what Gerald must surely understand, is that he returns from his errand, out of the long family tradition in this place, as the sole Shearer heir, alone in his responsibility to maintain and to shape their evolving sticker legacy.

In the meadow, the sun is a comfort on our shoulders. The asters bend their heads to the drift of our passing. The wind mourns as it moves through the blue tips of the spruce and the winter-greyed needles of the greening pines. Summer is so brief here.

• • •

The trip down is always faster than the trip upward. Over and around the downed tree, past the snowfields, past the laboring men and machine, past the towering aspen and the massed flowers. Soon we can see the county road below us, pickups and cars and an occasional semi straining to gain elevation.

Ruth turns to look at me, all alone in the backseat now, and then at Gerald. "This was really a good day," she says. "Thank you."

To our left, the creek roars downward toward the Dolores River, then on through mountain meadows and horse pasture, swift and clean. Gerald pulls close to the bank, stops, leans out, and looks deep, far past the luxuriant fern, past the golden-faced daisies, into its rocky, mossy depth.

He is so still and for so long that Ruth moves toward him and puts one hand gently on his arm. "Lost something?" she asks.

The Course of an Urge

I.

Pick a shore

worth a sponge's

gaps, or carry

bucketfuls

back home—and scrub

every surface

with that liquid—

II.

I've chucked birch seeds into sinkholes
and wept—I moved near this lake to get

some rest, but today from the foyer I hear

a loon: I become lucid. In the poolhouse,
sniffing around, I can't find any hooks…

III.

Tall

tall worms, tall

tall pipes—

tall tall

fish, and tall

tall eyes—

Hunting

The first one you followed that night
walked to your door instead of the bed

at the day's ragged edge. The second
you saw propped up at the truck stop,

fingers broken. The last one sketched a
constellation and wept there, his moon

was his heavy head. You watched quietly
from his closet since you weren't invited in.

But the trees had asked to be burned
open. Their pulp, you could make a home

in it & since all their needles spelled your name
you could stop trying to take someone else's.

Children's Story

In the small woods behind
everything, the mother lifted
her hand to each tree branch

as if it would be kissed. He
waited his turn. Hid himself as
a birch. As an effigy. Was one,

now. When nothing was left
to lead out of the trees, the story
ended. We lived through the winter

by sparing. What we could spare
was needed for kindling.

Privacy

Tad gurgles and spits into the sink. Behind him, he hears his wife rummaging through her purse with the frantic rattle of active women. But she's not going anywhere, because she never does. She is only forty-three, and already her skin has a loose, ochre quality; it is old lady skin. Tad can make himself angry just thinking about it.

He moves back into the bedroom, and Rachel switches places with him, steps into the bathroom. "I left your ties on the bed," she says as she pulls the door closed. And there they are: red tie, blue tie. Their twelve-year-old Russian wolfhound, Mother-in-Law, is stretched out near the pillows, her long face jutting over the side of the mattress. They bought her when she was a puppy for what seemed like a million dollars, and when they took her home they spent all night drinking and cracking jokes about which of their relatives she looked like most. Staring at that huge aristocratic snout, Tad got his mind stuck on Rachel's mother, and somehow he convinced his wife to agree. That was the kind of couple they used to be—playful, a bit mean. You know you've fallen out of love when you stop seeing yourselves as better than everyone else.

Mother-in-Law moans, blinks at him. She's big as hell but paper-thin, doll-like, with that squished face and a dark patch of yellow that turns white as it nears her stomach. She looks like a golden retriever that's been run over by a bus.

Tad selects the blue tie. He hears Rachel turn on the shower and slide the curtain open and then closed. The steam will soften her skin—soften, and expand. He goes to the kitchen, where Owen is waiting and scowling.

"Morning, dude," says Tad.

Owen says nothing. He's only six years old and already wise to the power of silent suffering.

"Pouting is smart," says Tad. "But I have to send you to school or the cops will come, so."

It's Owen's first day of kindergarten. He should be in first grade but he fell behind because of the cancer. Tad spent a year just sure Owen would die, and then he had the transplant and was better before they knew it. Owen got better, but Rachel didn't. Tad scoops up Owen's paper plate and tries to Frisbee it into the trash. He misses by three feet.

The shower goes off and soon Rachel comes into the kitchen in her ninety-pound bathrobe. "When will you be home?" she says.

Tad holds up his briefcase like it's evidence of something. "Usual," he says. The truth of it makes him spiteful. "You're looking a little pale," he says. "You could use some color."

Rachel flushes and looks brighter than she has all morning. "I'll open the shades in the TV room," she says. "See if I can get some sun in there."

Tad just smiles and heads for the door. This is all she worries about—sun. Owen gets too much; she gets not enough. But her skin needs a lot more than sunlight if it's going to get better. It needs to be *looked at*, by *people*. She stays inside all day and her skin withers from lack of attention. It's like how plants grow faster if you talk to them. The body needs spectators, and when it doesn't get them it wilts and dies.

Tad blows a kiss toward the empty space of the doorway and steps out onto the deck.

Tad writes a story and e-mails it to forty women:

> *Marlene goes to the post office to send her mother a birthday gift. She has woken up early to avoid a line. But she has forgotten that it is the week before Thanksgiving, and everyone is sending cards and care packages. When she arrives, the post office is*

filled with people. She recognizes a few faces from her neighborhood, but most of them are strangers. She gets in line but begins to panic. She places her hand against the wall to remind herself that she can still control her body. She can't breathe, and she feels sick to her stomach. After a minute, she runs out of the building and drives home. She feels everyone's eyes on her back.

He closes the browser. By tomorrow morning he should have responses from most of the study subjects—they'll tell him if the story situation is similar to their own. Tad works in the social sciences department of the university downtown; he has a degree in clinical psychology. When he was twenty-two he spent a year at an Antarctic research station, studying the social habits of the scientist and techs who work their whole winters trapped at the base. At the beginning of winter, they'd all say their favorite place was the break room or the lab, where they could talk shop with their colleagues. By the end of winter, they all preferred their bedrooms—white, windowless rectangles about the size of the average prison cell.

Now he studies agoraphobia, which mostly affects women. He studied it for ten years, and then three years ago his wife got it, like it was some disease he carried home on his hands. Owen was sick and she was sick and now she never leaves the house.

His assistant comes into the office with a stack of consent forms. "All signed," she says. She's an exchange student from New Zealand. This seemed exotic to Tad when she sent him her resume, but he's been disappointed since. He'd pictured a tall beauty with a deep, even tan, like one of those college girls from Miami or somewhere else stupid. But she's all pale hair and red skin. She might as well be British, really, the kind of foreigner Americans view with disdainful recognition, like a man looking back on the embarrassing hair and bad complexion of an old yearbook photo.

"Thanks," he says. She comes close and brushes her elbow against his elbow. It seems like she's going to try again. Tad had thought they call New Zealanders *Kiwis* because of the fruit, but she told him it was because of some bird. He'd looked it up later and saw the pictures—a weird, flightless thing, like a rat with plumage and a bill. It looked like it should be extinct.

"Staying late tonight?" she asks. She places the tips of her fingers over his knuckles. She's been working in the file room, so she smells like air freshener and dust. Tad sighs. It's not that he'd cheat on Rachel anyway; all he'd wanted was a hot assistant.

His cell phone vibrates on the desk and he picks it up, flips it open. "Yeah?" he says.

It's Rachel. "Can you come home?" she says. "I was cleaning the closet in the guest bedroom."

"OK?" he says.

There's a pause. She's gathering herself for something. He can picture her doing it—the tense downturn of her full lips, the flare of her nostrils as she breathes through them. "I found a...little house," she says. "I don't really know how to say it, but I found a little house in our house."

Tad buys a block of sharp cheddar. He's still not sure what Rachel was talking about, but he can tell this will be one of those nights where he fends for himself. At least now he can have cheese and crackers.

When he gets home the lights are on, all of them, including the small one over the stove. Rachel likes it bright inside to maintain her day/night cycle, but this is just insane. He walks through the house switching off lights as he goes: *flick, click, punch.*

There's a touch lamp by the sofa; to turn it off he'll have to cycle through two or three brighter settings. "Fuck it," he says. Then he calls out, "Hello? Wife and child?"

"In here!" someone says. It could be either of them. Owen sounds like a girl; Rachel sounds like a girl.

He follows the voice toward the second floor. The staples in the carpeted stairs are coming loose and they poke through the seams like little fangs. In the mornings they catch the back of his ankle and carve a biopsy from his heel. There are never any band-aids, so whenever it happens he just puts on his socks.

He enters the guest bedroom. Rachel, Owen, and Mother-in-Law are stretched out on the floor, staring into the open closet. There's a glow on their faces like from a movie screen, and only the dog turns her head to acknowledge him. The first time Rachel had a panic attack they were at the movies. He'd convinced her to go out, to let her mother stay with Owen for one night. They sat near the back, and he kept sneaking glances at her in the screen light. He was eager to see her thinking about something other than Owen dying; he needed it, craved it. Living with her was like having someone whisper the same word into your ear, over and over, forever. Then in the middle of the movie she stood up, and her seat snapped up, and she was completely never the same.

"Welcome home," he says to himself. Rachel glances at him and points toward the closet. He takes a look.

It's exactly as she said—a little house, *their* house—exactly. The same dark peaked roof with a patch of shingles missing near Owen's skylight. The same weird paint job—palladium plum, a total lapse in judgment. The same gray trim, same white doors, same deck stained the color of whiskey. He takes a step closer. The roof reaches as high as his knee.

Tad shakes his head. All of the lights are on inside the little house. It is *powered.*

"Keep looking," says Rachel.

So he puts his face close and stares into the windows. Each room is identical to its larger counterpoint, and Tad takes an

unexpected pride in seeing his old recliner in the tiny living room—Rachel fought him about it for weeks. The obvious comparison is to a dollhouse, but there is an unmistakable difference between that idea and this one: Dollhouses don't look real.

"You found this here in the closet?" Tad says.

Mother-in-Law perks up and begins to growl.

"Shh," says Rachel.

"There's someone in your bedroom," says Owen.

The curtains for the master bedroom were drawn before, but now they are open, and a face is at the window. His head is no bigger than the tip of Tad's pinky. He is squinting. His thick eyebrows slant below coffee-colored hair that grows up and away from his forehead. His thin lips dampen the handsomeness of his square chin. On his left cheek, there is an oval of discoloration that starts near the ear lobe and runs above the jaw line. It happened when he was nine years old. A sewing machine fell on his face.

Tad waves. Little Tad waves back.

There is a twenty-four hour standstill. Tad calls in sick and spends the day camped in front of the closet with Rachel and the dog. Owen joins them after school. Sometimes Little Tad appears again at the window, but mostly he goes about his business, and his family does the same. Through experiment, they discover that when Tad leaves the house, Little Tad vanishes—same with Owen. Rachel, of course, never leaves.

When the little family is together, their dynamic is uncomfortably familiar. Little Rachel moves aimlessly about the house, turning on the lights, and Little Tad follows her, turning them off. Tad watches their tiny lives unfold with embarrassment, even shame in the way of any secret that is suddenly made public. They only catch glimpses of Little Owen as the top of his head bobs past the windowsills. Little Mother-in-Law is as useless as the big one; her legs look like toothpicks cut in half.

"Wow," says Rachel. "Just, wow." She tugs absently at her earlobes, her tangled hair spilling into her palm. She hasn't looked so good in years.

"I'm sick of this," says Tad. "We're getting it out of the closet."

"But—" Rachel starts.

"Do you want a good look or not?" he says.

Rachel stands. He directs her into the closet and she squeezes past the house.

"Our bulkhead is back here!" she says.

Tad squats and grips both ends of the house by the overhang. He begins to lift, and Rachel bear hugs the sides to help keep it steady. But he can hear furniture sliding around in there, the clink of light fixtures hitting against the walls. He takes baby steps backward from the closet. Then he stops.

"What are you doing?" says Rachel. "Come on."

He stares at her. If Little Rachel is like his Rachel, this is the first time her geography has changed in over three years. Freud thought agoraphobia was women turning away from desire, but Tad sees the attendant fear as more on the surface than in the subconscious. He's found that pregnant women are susceptible to public panic because they literally lose track of where their bodies begin and end. When Rachel stopped leaving the house, she told him that if she went outside she would cry, or retch, or sweat, or piss herself. It was as though her body might erupt, turn inside out, and reveal her private functions. And in all his years of study, this is the one thing he was never able, never thought to do—grab her whole damn house by the edges and carry it to a different side of the room.

Tad puts the house down by the bed. Rachel gets on her knees and inspects for signs of damage. He goes to the window and looks out onto the street. Two of the neighborhood boys are playing Wiffle ball near the mouth of the cul-de-sac. They've placed a hockey net behind the batter to catch the ball on a swing-and-miss. There are no bases, no other players. They aren't

playing for score. The batter swings—a long, uppercut swing—and the ball whistles into the air. The pitcher runs to catch it, but he's lost it against the clouds. The entire experience has no framework, no mechanism in place to let them know when the game is finished. Tad wants to take a footstool and hurl it through the window.

"What are you looking at?" says Rachel. "I just had the idea that if we moved their house, ours might move. But—" Tad shrugs.

"You sound disappointed," she says. "Oh, there he is."

Tad comes back to the house and kneels down. Inside, the kitchen table has slid against the wall, and it looks like some pictures have fallen. Little Tad is standing by the sliding glass doors of the deck, shouting at them. He is angry. Tad can't hear much, just a little high-pitched something, like if one of Mother-in-Law's squeaky toys could make sounds underwater. Little Rachel and Little Owen appear beside him and look out, frowning and scared.

"Oh good," says Rachel. "They're OK."

"They're making an awfully big deal of it," says Tad. He waves.

Little Tad rears back and bangs his fist against the clear door. It goes, *plink*.

Little Tad balances a plate of spaghetti in the crook of his elbow and cuts the light in the kitchen. He disappears for a moment, and then Tad finds him again in the hallway leading to the living room and stairs. He cuts the light again. Upstairs, Little Rachel is eating alone in the guest bedroom. Every time she hears a light switched off she looks behind her and sinks further into the bed. A few minutes ago it seemed like she was crying.

Tad didn't call in sick to work today—he just didn't go.

Owen comes into the room and throws himself into Tad's lap. Rachel smiles in his direction but Tad can't look at her. Once when Owen was getting better they tried to go for a walk

before it turned snowy. They made it to the end of the driveway before Rachel ran back to the house. Tad had the keys, so she couldn't get in, and she threw herself flat with her back against the wall. It reminded Tad of a prisoner in a silent movie, inching along the prison fence to avoid the slow, searching spotlight. It was a nostalgic sort of panic—voiceless and extreme. He felt such sympathy for her then, but reflecting on it now he wishes he had gone for that walk.

Rachel goes to the window and throws open the curtains. She does it self-consciously; she wants Tad watching. She is getting happier by the minute; he sees it in the color of her skin, the moistness of it. He can't believe she looks sexy. Time is running out to save their marriage, he knows this, but ever since the tiny house, whatever kept his anger in check has disappeared for good, and now he wants nothing to do with her. It's the kind of thought that should be accompanied by sadness, but it feels a whole lot more like relief.

Little Tad turns off another of Little Rachel's lights, and big Rachel purses her lips and glares. Little Tad passes by the guest bedroom and is about to keep going when he stops and cranes his neck.

"What's he doing?" says Rachel.

Tad frowns. "I think he's staring at you," he says, and right as he says it, Little Tad turns in his direction. "And maybe now me?"

Little Tad is working on something. His chest rises and falls. Rachel draws closer and so does Tad. Downstairs in the tiny house, Little Mother-in-Law is standing in the kitchen, tonguing the glass door like she's trying to lick her way through it. Little Tad chews on his lip and *thinks*. Whatever he's thinking about he needs his whole body to do it. He stares at the spaghetti like it might bite him.

"That's just your spaghetti," says Tad.

Little Tad puts the plate on the floor—right there on the floor—and turns a light back on for Little Rachel. He goes into the guest bedroom and walks straight up to his wife. The queen-sized bed absorbs her; she disappears into the pumpkin orange of the comforter. She can't meet Little Tad's eyes. She is less alive than *blankets*.

"Jesus," says Tad. "Is that how you look?"

Rachel says nothing. Little Tad puts his hand on Little Rachel's shoulder. She flinches but then settles. He leans at the waist like he's bowing and kisses the top of her head. He kisses again where he's just kissed and then straightens up and leaves. Little Rachel watches him go with a huge, glowing smile.

Tad looks to Rachel and she's got the same shocked grin. She hoots and does a kind of fist pump—she almost punches the chimney off the tiny house.

"You gotta be kidding me," says Tad.

"Unbelievable!" says Rachel. "That was so romantic!"

Tad shakes his head. He realizes Owen is staring up at him with a horrified expression.

"Dad?" Owen says. Tad looks down at him and sighs. "I need to get back to work."

Tad has forty e-mails from forty women. One says,

> *For me I would never even try the post office haha. Minute I step outside I feel eyes watching me I don't even need people anymore. That's how it gets so bad... you have your safe normal home and then everything outside is all in your head like nightmares. I guess tell "Marlene" I say sorry coz she's just a newbie and it gets way worse from there.*

Tad grimaces. He's been back at work for three days. His hands are dry from all the paperwork that was waiting for him. It even feels dry under his fingernails; he sucks his fingers like a little boy. At first he hated leaving Rachel alone with the tiny house, but now he almost prefers work, even if it means talking

to his assistant. Every time he goes home, something feels just a little bit different. Last night he heard Rachel creep out of their bedroom at one in the morning. It's obvious where she went.

He drives home. Once he's there he lingers on the deck in front of the door. He jingles his keys from inside his coat pocket. He likes the music of this—casual, with a jazzy, improvised sound, like he might use them or he might not.

He goes inside and the house is on the kitchen table. Rachel's got it set up under the chandelier like a centerpiece. Mother-in-Law is waiting for him by the shoe rack and he pats her on the head. Her ears flatten back before his hand even touches her. Rachel comes in and sweeps her arm toward the table like a merchandise model.

"Do you like it?" she asks.

"It looks like a big cake," he says.

She rolls her eyes. "Not everything on the table is food."

Tad grunts and checks on the house. Little Owen is passed out in the playroom, and Little Mother-in-Law is pacing near the front door. Who knows where she pees. Little Tad and Little Rachel are in the living room; she's got her feet up on the couch and he's poking around near the bookshelf.

Tad pauses and looks back to the playroom. Little Owen's toy chest has been pushed into the far corner, and his coloring desk has been moved near the window. The middle of the room is a huge, empty space—they've *created* a huge, empty space.

They are redecorating.

"What's going on in here?" he says. Almost every room is changed. Extra chairs have been moved and stored somewhere else. The symmetry of the foyer has been completely undone; the standing lamp is adjacent to nothing.

"Look in the bedroom," says Rachel. She's watching him hard.

He puts his face to the window and closes one eye like he's looking through a telescope. He sees it immediately. Everything in the bedroom is the same except for one thing that isn't.

"They've pushed their beds back together," he says, but Rachel isn't there anymore. He hears her footsteps on the stairs. Back in the living room, Little Tad has curled up with a book, and he's got his free hand draped over Little Rachel's bare feet.

Tad chases Rachel to the bedroom. "So?" he says.

"He's being nicer to her," she says. "He means it."

Tad points to the window. He points to the window again. "You don't even know what it's like out there. That's what's funny to me."

She stares him down. "I've been better. I opened the window today, put my hand on the screen—"

Tad really laughs this time. "Do you know how many women tell me they put their hands on the screen, every day? A hundred. A thousand. I have a thousand e-mails right now from women with their hands on the screen."

Rachel starts to cry. "I'm getting better, and you're getting worse," she says. She pushes past him and runs downstairs. Maybe she'll go to the basement and work out. It occurs to him for the first time that the tiny house must not have a basement; there's no foundation for it. Poor Little Tad. The first floor is actually the bottom.

Owen wanders into the bedroom. It looks like he's been sleeping. His pajamas are stretched out and too big for him in the first place. He could just be Jell-O under there.

"What about me?" he says. "Am I getting better or worse?"

Tad shoos him out of the room. "You got better a long time ago," he says.

Tad's assistant buttons her blouse and slides down from off the file cabinet.

"Whew," she says. "That was nice." She's breathing heavy, and her accent is ridiculous. It sounds like someone's clipped off the end of her tongue.

Tad pulls up his pants and tucks himself in. The whole office smells bad now— what a mistake. The standing fan whirs

and oscillates and blows dust all over them. His assistant is glistening. Her skin is so white at the neck and then just red, red, red at the face. She looks like a lollipop.

"You can come back to my place if you're up for it. My apartment is close."

"Oh, God," he says. "No thanks."

She draws back. "Why are you even here?" she says.

"I don't know," he says. "I feel sick when I go home."

"OK," she says. She picks up his tie and tosses it into the wastebasket. "Go be sick then."

Tad considers fishing it out of the trash but thinks better of it and leaves. By the time he gets home it is almost two in the morning. He can smell the drink on his own breath. He stumbles to the kitchen table and sits down. The tiny house is lit up from inside. He can hear Little Mother-in-Law scratching against the front door.

"Good for you, girl," he says.

Up in the master bedroom, a light goes on and Little Rachel comes out of the bathroom in her bra. Her hair is wet and she's toying with it as she walks around the bed. She squeezes it, releases. It holds the form of her curled fingers and tightens up into rings. Little Tad enters from the hallway and goes to her. She smiles and does a little feint like she might run, but she doesn't. He kisses her and puts his hand on her stomach, his fingers stretched wide. Then he turns and looks at Tad.

He comes to the window and they stare at each other. "Don't you do it," says Tad. "We're the same."

Little Tad draws the shade down.

"Hey!" says Tad. He taps his finger against the glass, first gently, then harder. He moves his hand all along the house, tapping and pressing against it. Little Mother-in-Law is barking and yipping, going nuts. It's the clearest sound he's heard from in there. He aligns his finger with the window of the living room and shoves it right through. The glass breaks and some of it gets

caught up in his fingernail. He bleeds on the tiny sofa and then flicks the whole thing into the bookshelf.

Tad wakes up in the basement. He's draped on Rachel's exercise machine and half his body has fallen asleep. He slaps his thigh and limps to the stairs, pulls himself up by the railing. He pauses at the top of the landing to catch his breath. He pats his pockets, but there aren't any keys to rattle. He can walk through the door or stay in the basement forever.

He turns the knob and Rachel is waiting for him in the kitchen, her arms crossed.

"Did you do this?" she says, pointing to the house.

Tad comes over and she steps back—he ignores this. The tiny house has seen better days. The damage to the living room window has been covered with a tiny bedspread that billows a little from nowhere wind. Miniature shards of glass are still evident on the table and around the point of fracture.

"I didn't put up that bedspread, if that's what you mean," he says.

Rachel scoffs. "Little Mother-in-Law is missing. I hope that makes you happy."

Tad shrugs. The rest of his assault did more damage than he'd realized. Parts of the roof are bruised, the shingles raised like the flaps of an airplane wing. He's cracked the wall near Little Owen's bedroom; with a small section of unpainted grain exposed, it all just looks like balsa wood, like some student project in Tech Ed.

Rachel is standing by the door, surrounded by luggage.

"What?" he says.

"I'm going on vacation," Rachel says. "My mother is outside. Owen is coming with us."

"OK." Tad laughs. "See you in twenty minutes."

"You were cruel from the beginning," she says. "From the first day I stayed home."

Tad shrugs again. "See you in twenty."

Rachel leaves. The screen door makes a kind of hiss as the springs close it slowly behind her. Tad watches her walk to her mother's sedan. She presses the tips of her fingers against the hood like someone testing bathwater for heat. He can see the top of Owen's head in the backseat, just a little flash of blue eyes and blond cowlick.

Tad scratches his head and looks around. The linoleum in the kitchen is faded from years of muddy boots and spills and shitting wolfhounds. He could tear it up, put in hardwood. The pictures hanging from the wall are jostled and askew, probably his fault from last night. One of them shows Rachel posing with a beach umbrella—who knows where. He remembers moving the tiny house from the closet that first day, how everything got shifted just a little to the left.

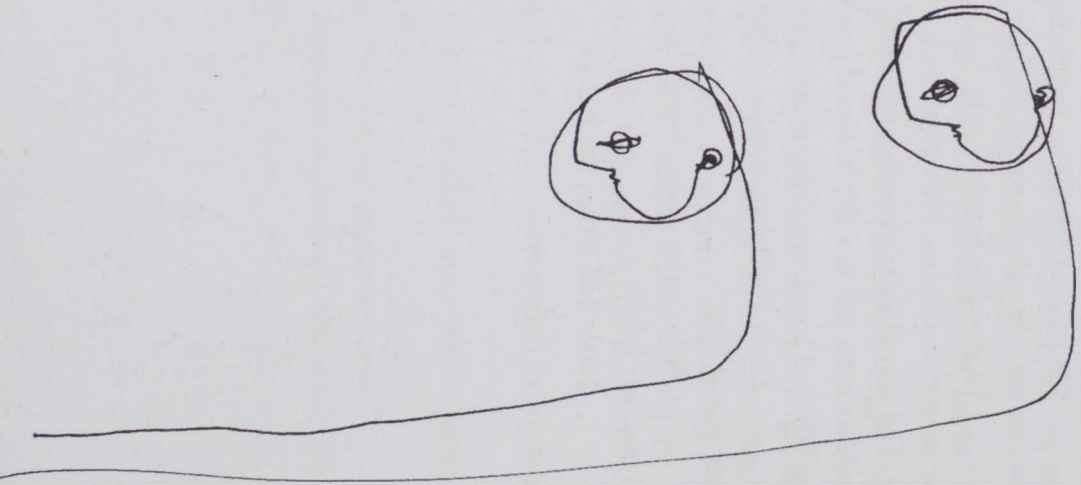
He hasn't been alone in this house for over three years. She can say what she wants to say, but that's worth mentioning.

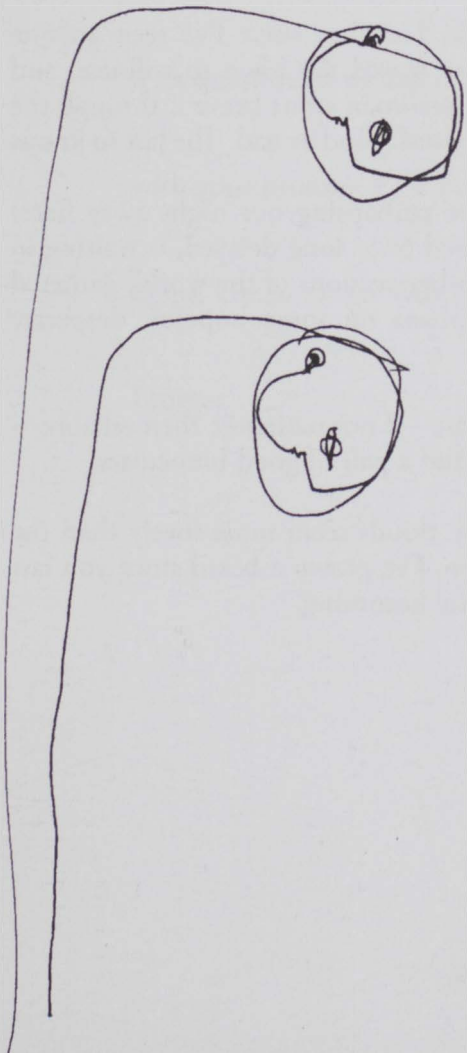
In the tiny house, Little Tad appears in the window of the master bedroom. He's wearing a suit with a miniature red tie. Tad would need tweezers to handle it. Any smaller and you couldn't even call it a tie; it would just be fabric. After a certain size it's hard to see anything as more than material.

Little Rachel appears at Little Tad's side and they both stare out at him.

"What's she doing here?" says Tad. "Don't you know Rachel just left?"

Little Tad closes the blinds.





Oh obstinate Nursey—

I forgot my glasses on the sink, so the damp bottom branches & I played "Seeing Eye Dog" for the insects to delight at. Filling in the blanks of the few stories I've heard, it seemed just the sort of moon-spurred derring-do the grandchildren would admire & potentially respect.

It's been a generation since I've had the respect of a child. The curtain's not drawn on the century for nothing, darling. Still, the war continues to glow after two decades' cooling time & seems less & less likely to be of the fading sort.

It's near a week, I realize, since I've seen anyone at all. Perhaps something scared the town to stillness, and that queasy goddamned mailman won't brave it through the overgrowth to bring me word, good or bad. The last to know.

Perhaps (if we're perhapsing our night away here) your note, long considered & so long delayed, is waiting in a canvas post bag with other versions of the world, gathered before scattered, all orphans on some hopeful, desperate train.

Certainly I'll wait—if not patiently, then reliably—with a headful of songs and a pair of good binoculars.

Some nights the clouds seem more lovely than the stars as I remember them. I've grown a beard since you last saw me, Alisa, & it's awful becoming.

Lights Out.

The fuse box
is a medicine-bank, an ark

of home remedies.
The buttons crumble like

aspirin, taste like tonic
water washed down with

lime. I feel altogether
brisk, bundled in nerves

that won't quiet—
it's a question of pacing and

I'm having trouble
with your protons. Our bodies

blink like traffic
lights. Green for go. Red

to stop. Yellow,
I forget.

Index of Haunted Houses.

Dusk is an interstate
coin locker.

The weather is
in handshakes in here.

Bribes pass

from cloud to
cloud: a black

coin or two,

a Nebraskan letter
to meteorology.

Doors open
like brackish brackets.

I see a slow-burning spleen

of light, a rose-
bush of bones, calm hands.

Aren't we
all anonymous
and lost?

Don't we all see
the lights of a city

from farther than we'd like?

Davis

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

BRIAN ALDRICH is truly alive.

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KARA DORRIS graduated in 2009 from New Mexico State University with a MFA in creative writing. Her poetry has appeared in *The Tusculum Review, ListenLight, Wicked Alice, Prick of the Spindle, Harpur Palate, Tulane Review, Parcel,* and *Skidrow Penthouse* among others literary journals. Her chapbook, *Elective Affinities*, is forthcoming from Dancing Girl Press (2010). She is the editor of an online journal, *Lingerpost.*

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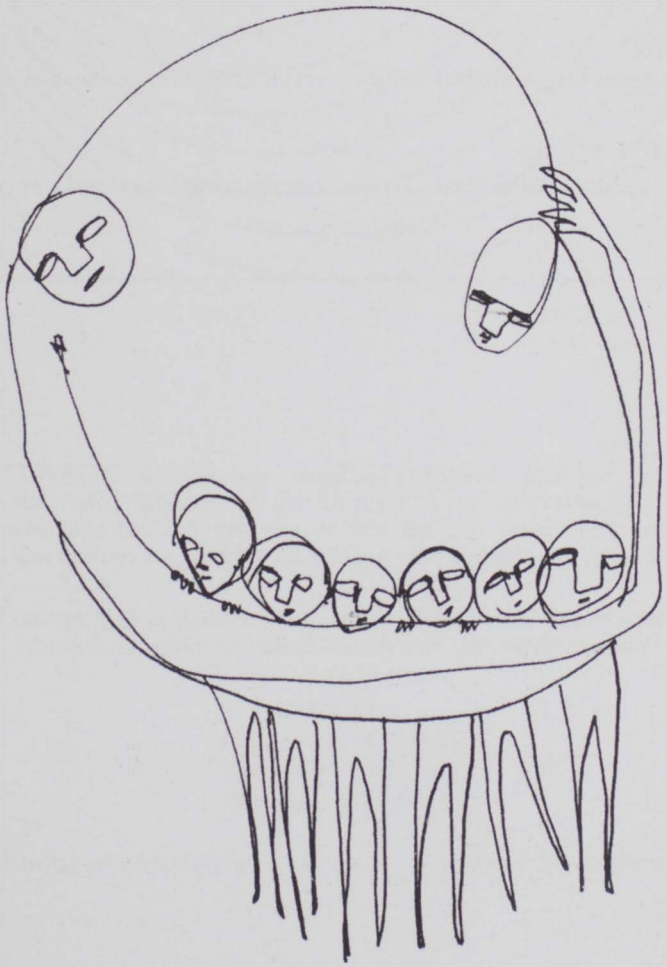

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POEMS

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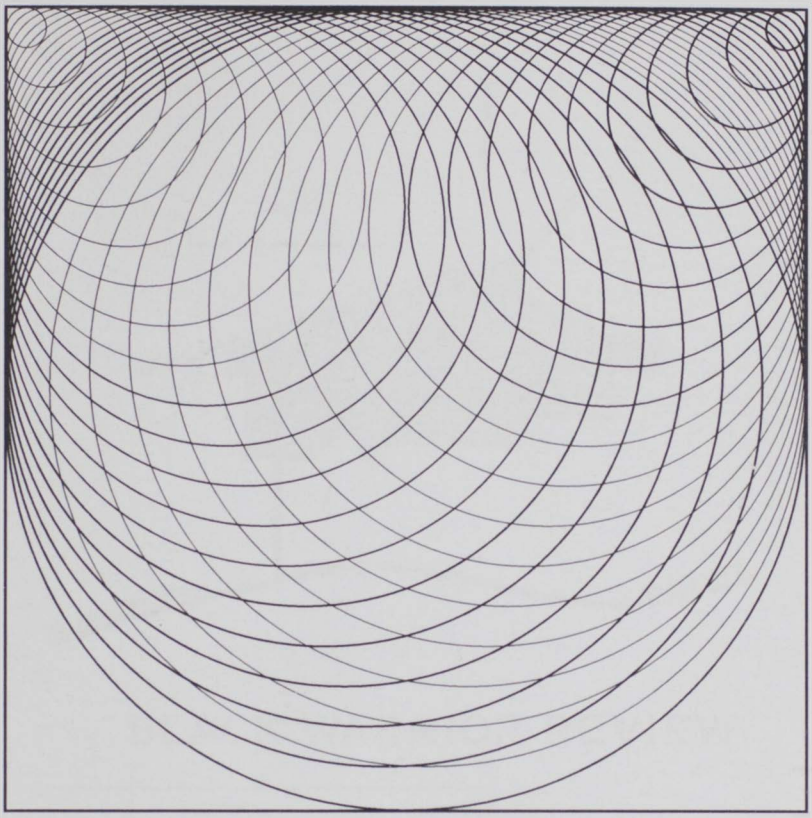

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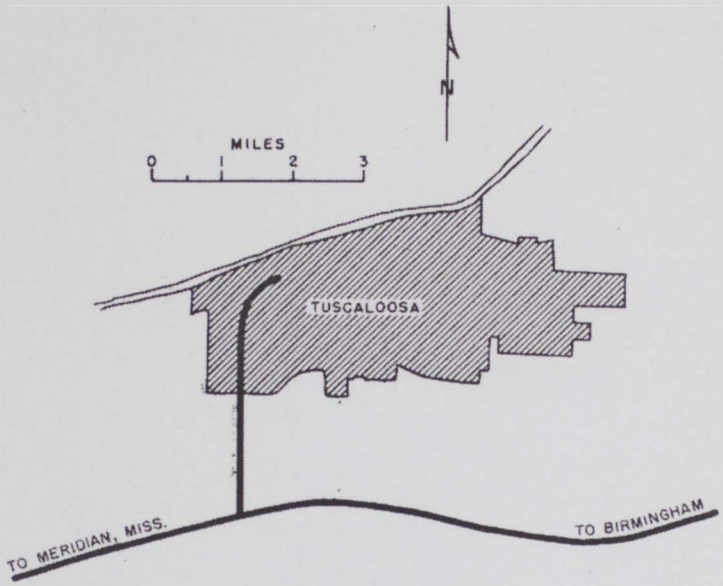

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